The TORTILLA WILDCAT Complete Novel By NELSON C. NYE

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WESTERN

VOL. 2 NO. 3

NOVEMBER, 1937

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BILL'S A SAP TO WASTE HIS TIME STUDYING RADIO AT HOME
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30x5.00-20	2.85	1.25
5.25-17	2.90	1.35
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.35
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35
5.50-17	3.35	1.40
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.40
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.45
6.00-17	3.40	1.40
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.40
31x6.00-19	3.40	1.45
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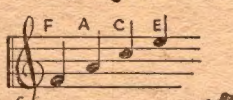

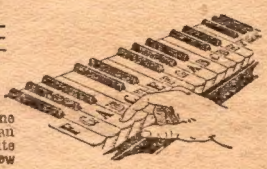

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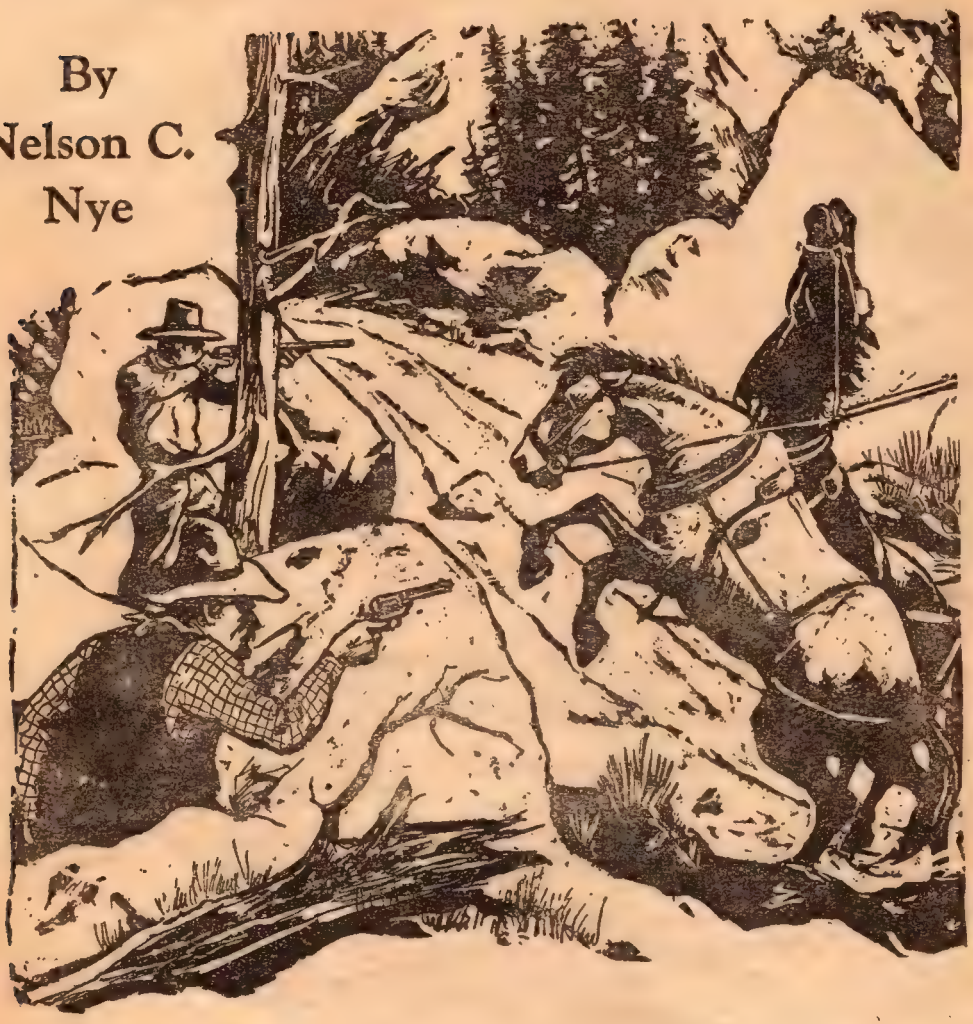
By Nelson C. Nye



CHAPTER I

SUDDEN SHANE

BEHIND the counter of the Come - An' - Get - It restaurant, the red-haired girl abruptly stemmed the crimson tide of her invective. Curiosity merged with the dark blue wrath in her stormy eyes as she swept an appraising glance across the lean figure of the man standing solidly just inside the swinging door.

Strangers, to Lisabet Corbin's experience, were common as rubble-rock in Tortilla Flat since the discovery, two months back, of gold and copper deposits in the Superstitions had boomed the town. But a *gentleman* was a thing uncommon, rare.

Hoisting herself to a comfortable perch upon the back counter, Lisabet Corbin suspended her detailed libel of Stone Latham's ancestry, while grave-

A hell-hole of turbulence where life hung upon the swiftness of a man's trigger-finger—that was Tortilla Flat. And even though Sudden Shane knew that a fast draw would beat four aces any time, he had never dealt with a hard-case crew in a bloodthirsty boom town. But Shane was a man who would go out like he lived—with his boots on, and a gun in his hand.

ly she studied the sample Fate had sent her.

The unknown was broad of shoulder, wiry-waisted and lean of hip; a dusty, leather-faced man in worn range garb. Discovery of a stubborn chin, a hawk's beak nose and determined lips, that just now were curved

in a faint smile, rewarded her scrutiny. But it was his eyes that caught her instant interest. They were gray, like smoky sage, and serene and confident and quiet as they rested on Stone Latham's darkly scowling face.

Stone Latham's lips twisted in a sneer and his lantern jaw swung belligerently forward. "What was that crack?" he said.

The four late customers ranging the stools along the plank counter stared at the stranger with an air of expectancy which told of their knowledge of Latham's prowess.

"I said," the stranger drawled, still faintly smiling, "that a man-sized gent had ought to be able to find better ways of amusin' himself than baitin' a defenseless girl."

Stone Latham, as the watchers caught their breaths in a united "Ah!" swept the stranger with a slow, insolent glance that passed from head to feet.

"Are you aimin' to make somethin' out of it, pilgrim?"

The stranger's grin disclosed twin sets of hard white teeth. "Shucks," he said, "I was just makin' a observation, so to speak."

"Yeah? Well, observations is dangerous as hell in this man's town. I'd admire to hear you take that 'un back right pronto!"

The stranger made no reply. He stood there easily, his hands hanging at his sides, the lazy smile still on his lips. Then suddenly he laughed.

Lisabet Corbin tingled to a swift cold thrill as Stone Latham, his right hand dropping to his holstered gun, took three long steps toward the mocking stranger and flung back his left hand, palm open, to slap the stranger's face.

It was an old affair, this trick of Latham's. It was a thing Lisabet Corbin had seen Latham get away with time after time. For, timed to the sound of his slap, his naked right-hand gun had always either intimidated his victim or brought him to a speedy grave. It was intended to do so now. With his right hand clamped about gun butt, Stone Latham's left hand started toward the stranger's face.

But this time Latham's blow was not permitted to land. He checked it in mid-air. And with the most excellent of reasons—something cold and hard and rigid was pressed uncomfortably against his stomach. The stranger's grin grew wider, but there was nothing humorous in the gray depths of his cold-eyed glance as he drawled:

"You're keepin' the lady waitin', hombre. She an' me is cravin' to hear you orate as how them disrespectful words of yourn was lies. An' you better orate quick."

An angry red washed into Stone Latham's scowling cheeks, then, swiftly fading, left them a sickly sallow gray. For the space of a hasty heartbeat he hesitated, then his hand came away from his gun and joined its mate above his head.

"I reckon," he growled thickly, "I was thinkin' about some oth—about some one else."

Then something cold and hard and rigid dug deeper into the flabby muscles of Latham's stomach. "An' I expect you're allowin'—" the stranger's drawl was inexorable—"that this lady's reputation is plumb unreproachable, that there was no occasion for either your remark or the insinuatin' sneer on your face, an' that in the future you'll see that it goes hard with any polecat that maligns her in your hearin'?"

Stone Latham licked burning lips while a vein throbbed wildly on his temple. His eyes were venomous with hate when he finally snarled, "That—that's right."

The stranger stepped back with an easy smile, exposing the fact that he'd menaced Latham with nothing more dangerous than a rigid index finger. But though the watchers saw, none snickered.

Stone Latham, when he could trust his voice, said wickedly, "I'll be re-

memb'rin' that. An' I'll be rememb'rin' *you!*"

The stranger's smoky eyes grew mocking. "Shucks," he smiled, "I'd feel cheated if you didn't."

LATHAM shoved the swinging door wide and strode angrily forth into the dusty night, followed a moment later by two of the stool-warmers. The two remaining customers, as the stranger moved forward, withdrew to the counter's far end and opened a low-voiced well-gestured conversation.

"Concernin' me," the stranger told himself. Aloud he said to the girl, "I'll have some ham an' aigs, ma'am, an' a cup of black java."

She leaned toward him across the counter, and her eyes were deep and dark and blue. "You hadn't ought to have took up for me, stranger. Stone Latham's a bad man to cross. He's orn'ry enough to carry sheep dip an' he'll lay for you sure."

"I don't expect I'll be worryin' a heap about Mr. Latham," the stranger shrugged. "I reckon his bark's a lot meaner'n his bite."

"You don't know Stone Latham," the girl said earnestly. "I'm wantin' to thank you for what you done for me, an' I'm wantin' to give you a piece of good advice. Get on yore hoss an' get out of these mountains quick."

"Shucks, I couldn't do that noways, ma'am. I'm figurin' to bed down here an' stay a spell. I allow I'm goin' to like this town."

"This town," she said vehemently, "is a place where a sidewinder would be ashamed to see his mother!"

"Shucks," the stranger chuckled, "I reckon it ain't that bad. Why, you're here, ma'am."

Her red lips twisted. "I fit the town, mister, as you'll learn quick if you insist on stayin' here till some one plants you. 'Cordin' to the lights of *decent* people, Stone Latham jest told Lize Corbin to her face what they've been sayin' behind her back for weeks."

Her blue eyes probed the smoky gray ones of the stranger as she defiantly added, "I'm Lisabet Corbin. Folks here call me Lize—when they ain't callin' me somethin' worse."

The stranger doffed his shabby hat and smiled infectiously. "Why, ma'am, I'm proud to know you. I'm S. G. Shane, though mostly I'm knowed as 'Sudden'. I reckon you an' me will get along first rate."

An instant longer her probing stare remained upon his face. Then abruptly she turned away. But not before he'd seen a telltale sign of moisture in her eyes. He shook his head a little grimly. Poor kid! Life in a gold camp was no place for a girl like her.

He studied her as she moved about the stove, stirring up a batch of tantalizing aromas as she worked preparing his meal. Her hair, so flaming red, was alive with glinty gleams of copper where the lamplight struck across it, and was openly rebellious as though never having known the curbing influence of comb or brush. Hers was a vital figure, alive with life and natural grace. She was like some wild thing held captive in a cage.

Belted overalls and a blue flannel shirt such as riders wear detracted nothing from her primal loveliness. The faded jeans and flannel shirt but accentuated the alluring contour of her slim figure. He admired her clean-limbed stride and the pluck that would not let her run away, but held her here to face the slurs and slander of this gold camp.

She placed the meal before him. "You came from Texas, didn't you?"

Her unexpected question drew a frown. But the frown swiftly faded beneath a grin. "I reckon you called the turn, ma'am. You didn't see my hoss by any chance?"

"You got the look of a Texas man," she said. "I'm from Texas, too—way back. My dad was a West Texas cattleman. My mother died when I was a kid. Then dad he got the gold fever an' we been followin' the gold camps ever since."

"An' where's your dad now, if I might ask?"

"If you was to ask folks back round Pecos, an' they'd heard the news, I reckon they'd opine he was in heaven," she said slowly, wistfully. "But if you was to put that question to the mavericks of Tortilla Flat they'd tell you Dry Camp Corbin—the ol' fool—was down in hell where he belonged. You see, one of Jarson Lume's gunslicks downed him when a rumor got spreadin' round he'd struck it rich."

Shane sat up straighter on his stool. His face seemed whiter and his chin thrust forward grimly.

"Jarson Lume, eh?" His voice was cold with a crackly crispness that drew the attention of the two stool-warmers at the counter's farther end. "I've heard that name before, ma'am. He's some pumpkins round these diggin's, I reckon?"

"He's top screw," said a cold, grim voice from the doorway. "An' he's some partic'lar who tosses his name around."

MR. SUDDEN SHANE paid no attention to the interruption; he did not even turn his head to examine the speaker. Shane's eyes remained on the girl's face. He took note of the sudden color that stained her cheeks and the look of mingled anger, loathing and resentment which, at the sound of the newcomer's voice, had flashed into her stormy eyes.

"You was sayin', ma'am?" Shane queried.

But Lisabet Corbin was not listening. Her blazing eyes were fixed above and beyond his shoulder; on the man at the door, he guessed. With one swift lunge her right hand dropped beneath the counter and came up with a sawed-off shotgun.

"Get outa here, you polecat!"

A harsh laugh dripping with insolent mockery struck the ears of Sudden Shane. He turned, then, slowly on his stool and let his calm, appraising glance play over the newcomer.

The man by the door had a cold bloodless face, handsome despite the tight, thin-lipped mouth and foppish, tiny black mustache. He was clad in the flat-rimmed hat, frock coat and black string tie of the professional gambler. He fingered his tiny mustache with a characteristic gesture and laughed again—slowly, softly, now.

"My dear, you are letting your nerves get the best of you. When I entered I believe I heard you and this, ah—gentleman—d i s c u s s i n g me. Haven't you learned that it's bad form discussing a man behind his back? Never mind, my dear—give you time and you'll learn a lot, I'm sure."

Deliberately ignoring both the girl and her shaking weapon, the man in gambler's clothes now turned to Shane. "I don't believe I have the pleasure of your acquaintance, sir."

"If you think it'll be a pleasure, you're mistaken," Shane drawled coldly. "I've got no use for woman-baitin' skunks."

No expression on the gambler's immobile countenance betrayed his feelings. No least twitching muscle gave any fraction of his thoughts away.

His unwinking flinty eyes were baffling as he said, "Neither have I. I'm Jarson Lume, stranger. I own the Square Deal, a gentlemen's resort across the street. I don't believe I caught your name?"

"I don't expect you did."

"H'm-m. I understand you had a little run-in with Stone Latham a few minutes ago. I know Latham pretty well and I'd like to warn you that he's not a forgiving man."

"I'm powerful astonished to find we've somethin' in common," Shane commented, and turned back to his meal. The girl was no longer in evidence and he guessed she had retired to the back room to escape Lume's obviously unwelcome company.

LUME came up and took a stool beside Shane. He gave the two men at the other end of the counter a long silent scrutiny at which, dropping coins to pay for their grub, they got up and slunk away.

"Got 'em pretty well gentled, ain't you?" Shane commented.

"Look here, stranger—it strikes me you're adoptin' the wrong attitude here—" Lume began.

"My attitude suits me right down to the ground," Shane cut in curtly.

"Well, it don't suit me, by hell, an' what I say in this town goes!" Lume growled. "There ain't no middle course in Tortilla Flat. Folks that ain't for me are against me—an' fools who are against me have a habit of kickin' off sudden. Do I make myself clear?"

Shane grinned. "What you got in mind?"

For a moment Lume eyed him intently, then relaxed. "That's better. You're showin' good sense. From what I heard about your run-in with Latham, you've got guts. I've got plenty of jobs for men of your caliber," he added, and paused suggestively.

"I ain't exactly in need of work," Shane said slowly. "Got a bit of cash left over from my last—job. But I'm always willin' to lend a open ear to a good proposition. What you got in mind?"

A faint smile fleetingly crossed the gambler's thin lips, but he took care not to let Shane see it. "Well, I'll tell you," he said confidentially. "I need a man to take a shipment of gold out to Phoenix. Course the stage'll take it out, you understand. But I need a gent on the box that'll see my shipment goes through without a hitch. I don't dare keep too much money on hand in this camp—too many crooks willin' to risk their necks in a try for it. There's places gettin' stuck up here right and left. Had three robberies in town last night. A killing, too."

He looked at Shane keenly, scrutinizing his bronzed countenance as though weighing him, as though striving to determine his potential value.

"Yes," he muttered at last, "I've got to get some of my dinero into a bank, an' the sooner the better for all concerned. Trouble is, the stage has been stuck up six times in the last month."

"Kinda wild country up here, I reckon," was Shane's comment. "I can see your angle, though. You want somebody to ride the stage an' see that your shipment ain't taken off."

Jarson Lume nodded. "That's it."

"Got any idea who's pullin' all these stick-ups?"

"I've got notions," Lume admitted, "but nothin' definite enough to act on. This town ain't got its growth an' she's tough as hell. A man has to be right careful what he says around here unless he's got a hankering for boot-hill. The way I look at it, it's cheaper to hire a shotgun guard than it is to make accusations without the evidence to back them up.

"There's plenty in this town have got it in for me already. I don't know why, I'm sure. Take Lize Corbin, now," he shot a covert glance at Shane. "She's got some wild notion I had somethin' to do with her old man getting rubbed out. Nothing to it, of course, but there it is. I can't get her out of the notion an' she threatens to salivate me every time I set foot on this side of the street. "Well," he concluded, "do you want the job?"

"Trip to Phoenix an' back, eh? An' after that?"

"More trips. In between times I'll find somethin' else to keep you busy," Lume said easily. "But that comes first. I'll pay you two hundred dollars for the trip—if you get the shipment through."

"Quite generous," Shane commented drily. "An' if I don't?"

"Not one damned cent."

"Fair enough. I reckon you've hired yourself a man. When you shippin'?"

"Stage pulls in from Globe tomorrow afternoon an' leaves for Phoenix tomorrow night at seven sharp. By the way, what am I supposed to call you?"

"Shane—S. G. Shane's the name."

"Glad I met up with you, Shane," Lume said, and held out a lean right hand which Shane somehow failed to grasp. Lume stared hard, endeavoring to make out whether the insult had

been deliberate or whether Shane had not noticed his gesture. But he could make nothing of Shane's expression as Shane was looking the other way, toward the door to the rear room in which Lisabet Corbin was angrily pacing the floor. With a curt "So long," Lume strode softly into the turbulent night.

Shane sat still, and there was an odd little smile on his lips.

CHAPTER II

TORTILLA FLAT

"RECKON I misjudged you some considerable, Texas man. I allow you are jest about as orn'ry as the rest of the fly-by-night owl-hooters that have come driftin' into this here town, ever since some damn fool went an' located gold an' copper in Fish Creek Canyon!"

Sudden Shane looked up into the scornful face and contemptuous dark blue eyes of Lisabet Corbin. He did not need a telescope to decipher the anger, the loathing, and the bitter disappointment that filled those flashing orbs. She had weighed him, found him wanting. The heat of a sudden flush warmed his cheeks beneath their bronze.

"Shucks, ma'am," he said, gravely considering her. "Now I reckon you have gone an' jumped to a bad conclusion."

"Damn bad, cowboy—an' I ain't doubtin' it's correct!" Cold hostility came into her voice. "Don't tell me! I saw you grinnin' like a chessy cat after your palaver with that tinhorn!"

"Why, ma'am, I expect you are right about my grinnin', though I hadn't figured I was doin' it that open-like."

"You addle-pated fool! D'you think you can p'rambulate around with skunks like Lume an' not get to smellin' jest like 'em? If you're goin' to lay down with dawgs, you gotta expect to git up with fleas. I'm a-tellin' you!"

"Now, ma'am, I was only—"

"I can't hang that buck in my smoke-house!" she cut him off. "Ain't you never heard that jestin' lies brings serious sorrers? I seen you an' that—that damn Lume huddled up gassin'! Thick as cloves on a Christmas ham, you was! Shane, I'm right-down disappointed in you!"

"Shucks, ma'am. Don't you reckon I had my reasons?"

"I sure do! You seen which way the wind blowed strongest an' piled your hay accordin'. But you'll git burnt if you go to playin' with Jarson Lume! Him an' Latham an' Bronc Walders an' a bunch more snakes of the same stripe is all mixed up together. Them an' Marshal Wolf Brady—who is a dang coyote—jest about runs this town."

Shane's gray eyes lost their accustomed twinkle and he looked uncomfortably away. She sure was a heap positive in her notions, he reflected. "Shucks, ma'am," he said with a little grin, "you ain't figurin' to class me with them reptiles, are you?"

"You got me fightin' my hat," she admitted angrily. "I jest can't make you out. First off, you make a monkey outa Latham. Then you git thicker'n splatter with Latham's boss! You got a screw loose some place? Why, you lunkhaid, them scorpions'll jest natcherly tie you up in knots! But go ahead—I reckon you been weaned some time. If you wanta hitch up with them varmints it's your business an' none of mine.

"But I'm a-tellin' you—" her red lips hardened in a bitter line and her voice came thickly, as though choked with feeling—"if you're goin' to run with them, you can't eat here. That's final! Slap your dinero on the counter an' git goin'."

"But, ma'am!" Shane expostulated. "This Lume jasper offered me a job! Ain't nothin' wrong in takin' a job—even with a tarantula—is there?"

"Job hell! Don't you know that butcher-bird's jest fixin' to git you killed off nice an' safe? I bet he offered you a job ridin' shotgun to a shipment of dust an' nuggets! Didn't he?"

THE cold contempt in her flashing eyes had not abated by a fraction. Shane stirred uneasily under her fixed regard. "Well," he admitted reluctantly, "he did offer—"

"I knew it!" she snapped vindictively. "Why, you dang lunkhaid! D'you think that slick coyote ain't got you figgered plumb center? You're the fifth fool he's hired for that job!"

"The fifth? What's happened to the others?" Shane asked innocently.

"Three of 'em got killed tryin' to scare off stick-ups an' the other one—'cordin' to Jarson Lume's tellin'—tried to skip off with the shipment himself. The driver—" she paused to glower at him scathingly—"blowed his brains out!"

Shane's glance searched her face intently. "Are you funnin' on me, ma'am?"

"Do I look like the funnin' kind?"

"Well, but that's terrible, ma'am."

"I allow that's what them four guards thought when they was cashin' in their chips! You can't play round with Jarson Lume."

"But, ma'am, he wouldn't dare pull nothin' so raw as that—" Shane began, when her short laugh cut him off.

"Listen," she told him. "Jarson Lume would dare anythin' if he saw sufficient profit. I'm a-tellin' you. I know that polecat from hocks to horns!"

"But mebbe—"

"There ain't no buts to it, Texas man. If you are Lume-minded, you'll play your hand out as you see fit. You sort of throwed in to do me a good turn tonight so I'm warnin' you. I don't aim to be beholdin' to no damn man. I've passed you the word; you can take it or leave it. It's up to you. Now clear outa here—I'm figurin' to close up pronto."

FROM open doors and windows great splotches of golden light seeped out across the hock-deep dust of Tortilla Flat's single crooked street, collecting in pools that but accentuated the sullen darkness of the moonless night. Oil flares, placed at appropriate intervals, served to illuminate the misspelled legends scrawled across the high false fronts of the town's flimsy buildings, and painted on the garish signs hung out above the town's plank sidewalks.

There were saloons and gambling halls, a hotel, several blacksmith shops, two stores and three honkytonks. The largest honkytonk was Gar-Faced Nell's Place—a dance hall of the lowest type. Everything went inside its tarpaper walls, and many a gent had seen its denizens rolled and chucked out in the dusty street to sleep off his knockout drops.

But the biggest resort of all, a combination dance hall, gambling hell and saloon, was the Square Deal—owned and operated by the poker-faced Jarson Lume.

Tortilla Flat's main stem was not a long one, but it fairly teemed with life. Cowpunchers rubbed elbows with hairy-faced and red-shirted miners; sleek, pale steerers walked cheek by jowl with mining engineers and cattle magnates; tinhorns, barkers, comeons and homesteaders—all mingled freely in the flotsam-jetsam composing the boom town's boisterous population. Many of the big, burly fellows walked with the rolling gait of the dismounted horseman. More than an equal number were horny-handed from grubbing in the soil and cliffs and creeks of the surrounding mountains.

When Sudden Shane stepped out upon the planks before the Lone Star Grub Emporium, there was a tiny smile on his genial lips. A twinkle came into his eyes as he recalled the girl's warning. Lize Corbin was a good sort, he reflected, and had a tremendous store of nervous energy and pluck.

Not many women, he told himself, would have the nerve to outface this hell-roaring camp and tell it in plain terms what she thought of it and the men who bossed it. There was, he felt, much about her for a discerning man to admire. In the parlance of the country she was a "square-shooter." He would cheerfully have bet his last dollar on the fact had he been called upon to do so.

And there were some people in this coyote town, some two-legged varmints who had annoyed an unprotected girl in a tough gold camp. The fact was patent in the defiant tilt of her chin and in the resentful light of her stormy eyes. He was all for her. But he did not intend to let her influence his plans or sway him from the course of action he had determined to adopt.

With the thought his jaw swung forward stubbornly. Nothing should prevent him from accomplishing his aim, or sidetrack him from the purpose which had brought him here.

Mounting his horse, he urged the animal down the dusty road till he reached the Miner's Rest. There he tied his mount to the scarred hitching rail among a group of others. With saddle bags across his shoulder he mounted the board steps and strode into the dingy office.

Several men were seated in its restricted space with chairs tilted comfortably back against the walls. None of these displayed the least interest in Shane until he said:

"I'd be obliged for a room. Be wantin' it indefinitely. How much?"

A bald-headed man with beetling brows looked up at him, arching his shaggy brows inquiringly. "Stranger, ain't you?"

Shane looked thoughtful while the others eyed him curiously. He pushed his hat back to scratch his head; brushed the corn-colored shock of hair back off his forehead and suddenly grinned.

"Well, yes," he finally admitted. "I reckon I could be fitted into that category. Ah—how about that room?"

The beetling-browed man stared at the others; they stared back. One of them, a tall man with heavy face and long, drooping mustache, nodded slightly.

The bald-headed man cleared his throat. "I can let you have a room, stranger. But she'll cost you right smart. My rooms rent for ten bucks a day."

Shane grinned. "I didn't aim to buy it," he said.

"You couldn't buy it fer all the gold in this camp, stranger. Rooms is scarce in Tortilla. I've charged—"

"Listen, fella. If I had ten bucks I wouldn't be wantin' your room."

"Huh?"

"I wouldn't be wantin' it because I'd be afraid for my life in here with that much dinero on me."

"Are you tryin' to be funny, mister?" the bald-headed man demanded with a scowl. "Ten bucks a room is my price—an' it's payable in advance."

"Well," Shane said, turning toward the door, "I sure hope you'll be able to rent it."

"Hey—where you goin'?"

"I'm goin' to fix me up a deal with one of these resort owners," Shane said, and went on out.

He climbed into the saddle and rode back along the dusty road till he reached the Square Deal. There he dismounted and, tying his buckskin, entered the resort.

WHEN his eyes had grown accustomed to the glare of the coal-oil lamps that were bracketed about the great barnlike room, he leveled a quick glance through the wavering haze of tobacco smoke. But he did not immediately see Jarson Lume.

Making his way to the long plank bar, he joined the line of men bellying it and had a drink. It was while he was toying with his second, that he saw the coldly handsome face of the Square Deal's frock-coated owner. Lume saw him at the same time and came toward him, stopping momentarily a number of times to return the

greetings of acquaintances. When Lume came up he reached out a lean white hand.

"Glad to see you here, Shane. Havin' a good time?"

Shane shook his hand with a show of cordiality. "I allow I'm gettin' around. Can you tell me where I can find a place to put up?"

"Well," said Lume, "there's the Miner's Rest down the street. They might take you or I could put you up here, if you don't mind doubling up with one of the boys."

"Mebbe I'd better put up here, where I can be handy in case you want me for anythin'."

"Good idea. When you're ready to turn in, go up the stairs over there an' go along the balcony till you locate room Number Ten. If there's anyone there, it'll be Bill Halleck. He runs one of the faro layouts here. He's off tonight. If he happens to be up there, just tell him I said you were to put up with him."

Shane nodded and started for the stairs. As he skirted the dance floor the music being furnished by the sagebrush orchestra came to a stop. Followed a stamping of feet and clink of spurs interspersed with the tapping of high-heeled slippers as couples started off the floor. A number of half-drunk customers bumped into Shane who passed the encounters off with grins. He had almost reached the stairs when he came face to face with Stone Latham, a frowsy, scantily clad blonde clinging to his arm.

Stone Latham came to a jolting stop, a bold intentness in his glance, a cynical curve to his lips. There were men who had hinted that Latham's folks on his mother's side had worn moccasins, that he had rather take his man in the back than elsewhere and was partial to a knife. But Shane could tell by a look at his heavy eyes that such hints had not been made in Latham's presence. For though the man had swagger, there was something about him that told Shane he'd plenty of nerve to back his swagger up.

Latham said, "Still here an' on top the ground, eh?" And his dark, lean-carved face crinkled into a grin; a grin, however, that was not matched by the light in his eyes.

Out of the corner of his eyes, Shane saw Jarson Lume coming toward them. He flashed his teeth at Latham and was about to pass on to the stairs, but Latham's left hand reached out and caught his arm.

"Just a minute, fella. I got some good advice for you. Pull your picket pin an' drift before a hunk of lead cuts short your rope."

"Is that a warnin'?"

"Just good advice; you better heed it." Relinquishing Shane's arm, Latham moved off with his blonde enchantress.

Shane grimaced and went on. Reaching the stairway, he took out his watch and squinted an eye at its dial. Ten after twelve. Much too early to turn in in an all-night town. "Mebbe I better go out a spell an' mosey around takin' in the sights," he mused, and made his way to the door.

He stepped outside, saw a man fumbling with his pony's reins.

"Get your hands off that hoss!" he snapped, and started forward.

As he cleared the porch something tugged at his open vest and a shot rang out, slamming against the buildings across the street. Shane stopped short and a second slug ripped through his hat. He caught the flash this time and his gun came out and up, bucked viciously against his palm as a livid flame belched outward from its muzzle. Came a blur of movement from the man beside his horse, but the fellow wasn't fast enough. Shane's shot struck him in the chest and smashed him backward out of sight.

He wheeled in time to see the first man sprinting desperately toward a building corner, men ducking from his path as though from a plague. With a shake of the head Shane let him go. He was returning his gun to leather when a heavy hand fell on his shoulder and whirled him round. A tall man

faced him and he felt the man's gun shoved into his stomach—hard.

The man's face was tautly parted over the yellowed teeth behind his drooping black mustache. His voice had a leaping rasp, "Hell's lookin' you in the eye, stranger—one move an' you're due for plantin'!"

CHAPTER III

LEFT-HANDED LAW

SHANE read murder in the tall man's heavy face, and for a long-drawn moment remained utterly motionless while silence spread a sound-proof blanket across the roaring camp. Not the faintest whisper disturbed his breathless hush. Almost curiously, he searched the tall man's face, noted the long, drooping mustache, the brown hair and the piercing black eyes beneath the shaggy, scowling brows. He remembered; this was the man he had seen in the Miner's Rest—the fellow toward whom the others had looked for orders.

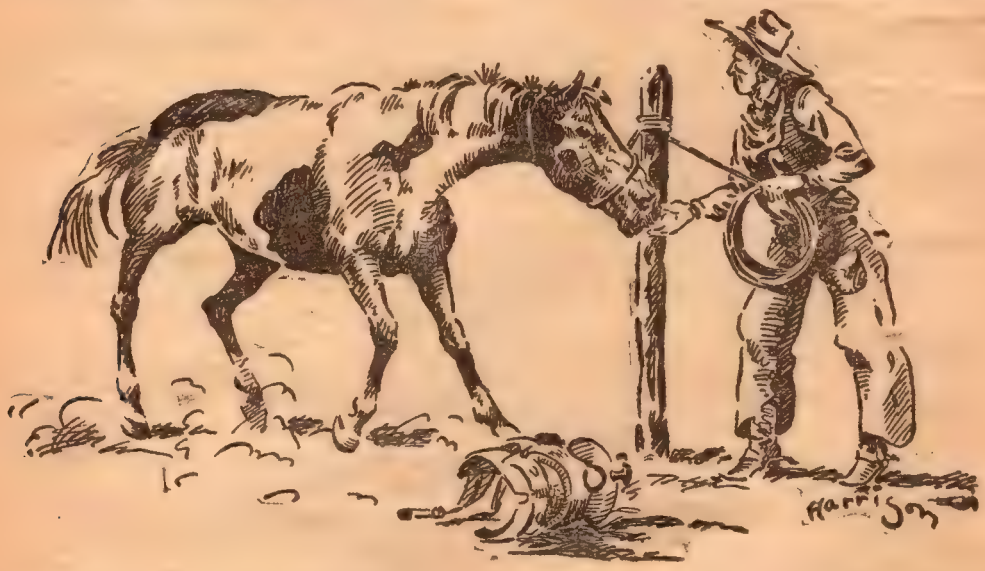
Shane's seeking glance rested fleetingly upon the tense whiteness of this man's fingers where they gripped the prodding gun. A shiver, it almost seemed, would have caused that gun to roar. Then a hard grin cut Shane's bronzed jowls angularly.

"Why, you look some peeved," he said.

An oath fell softly from the tall man's lips. "I'm waitin' to hear why-for you cut down on Groll that way."

Shane looked to where the boots of the man he'd gunned showed grotesque and motionless in a cleared patch between the horse's hoofs. "I allow," he drawled, "you're referrin' to the fella that was figurin' to make off with my hoss. Where I come from, the only fittin' reward for a hoss thief is a hasty chunk of Mr. Colt's fodder. Are you hintin' it's a crime to kill a hoss thief?"

"We're partic'lar who does the killin' in this man's town. By hell, I've a notion to git up a string party in yore honor!"



Shane's serene gray eyes met the other's calmly. "You represent the entertainment committee?"

"I represent the law, damn it!" The tall man's tawny eyes seemed sheathed in a scarlet fog, his twisted lips wreathed a malignant snarl. "Who do you think you are?"

"Me?" Shane seemed surprised. "I'm S. G. Shane."

"Yeah? Well, here's some damn good advice for you, Mister S. G. Shane. This here's a peaceful camp what ain't none partial to killers an' such like. If you figure to keep head an' body together, you better git outa this town 'fore daylight. It's the Law talkin' at you—me, Marshal Wolf Brady!"

"That so?"

"You're damn well right it's so! All the signs is pointin'—"

"I never did believe a heap in signs," Shane's cool drawl cut in.

"You better believe in these signs, mister; they're pointin' to a quick grave, an' the hole is jest yore size. Git out before daylight or you'll be planted here permanent!"

The collected crowd broke up slowly and disintegrated as, without another word, Marshal Brady wheeled and strode away.

Shane's low chuckle was rich with music. He did not appear greatly worried, and wasn't. "Shucks," he told himself, "it looks like I'm goin' to be right unpopular round Tortilla Flat."

Having extracted the spent shells from his gun and reloaded the emptied chambers, he sheathed it and strolled leisurely down the plank sidewalk, studying the heterogeneous mass of humanity which surged unendingly up and down the dusty street.

Here a three-card monte man plied his doubtful trade upon a tiny three-legged table. There a shell-game artist operated. Over yonder a man barked loudly of the theoretical value of some pet mining stock. He discouraged a sallow-faced, shifty-eyed advertiser of a honkytonk and sauntered on. It was an interesting town, he could see; a place of turbulence where life must hang upon the swiftness of a man's trigger finger.

AS he reached the intersection of an alley angling away between a pair of crazily leaning buildings, a woman's scream stopped him. Thinly it knifed through the scraping fiddles and stamping feet, through the heavy murmurous drone that was the voice of this Tortilla Flat. Tensing, he peered squint-eyed into the drifting shadows between the buildings. Again that scream slid up a sobbing scale that chilled his blood.

Then he was hurtling forward, stumbling through the darkness, his gun gripped ready in his hand.

From out the murk came a strangling sob, the pant of labored breathing, a curse and the slap of struggling bodies. In a window of the building to the right a shade snapped up and flung a bar of yellow light across the alley gloom. A hot, unreasoning anger took Shane as his eyes made out the scene.

In the arms of a lithe, swarthy-faced man struggled a panting, sobbing girl. Even in that instant of snarling wrath Shane realized that her sobs were not born of fear or despair; they were unmistakable sounds of fury.

But he had not paused to analyze these thoughts. As that leaping shade flung its bar of light across the murk he sheathed his gun and sprang. The sound of his striking fist as it met the swarthy chin was like the smack of a board on water. Even as the Mexican's hands fell from about the girl and she pulled free, Shane's left took the man in the stomach and wrung a grunt of agony from his bleeding lips. The swarthy one doubled and Shane's right came up from his boot straps in an uppercut that lifted the man clear of the ground and smashed him backward in a sprawling, motionless heap.

Shane's eyes swept to the girl and a startled oath escaped him. It was Lize Corbin and she met his widening stare defiantly as she strove to pull her torn shirt across her shoulder.

"Habit of yores, ain't it?"

"You mean rescuing ladies from distress? Why, ma'am, I'm powerful glad I got here when I did," Shane said, and his voice was coldly grim.

It seemed to bring some subtle thrill to the girl, for she ceased her movements with the shirt and swayed

forward slightly toward him, some inexplicable light chasing a portion of the storminess from the intent glance that searched his face.

"You ain't mean—you ain't meanin' that—"

"I'm meanin," Shane drawled, "that if I'd got here a minute later I'd prob'ly have killed that skunk. An' the Lord knows there's killins enough chalked up against me now."

The soft light vanished from her eyes and left them bleakly blue. In them swam anger, resentment, a sullen devil-may-care defiance. Yes—and a wistful gleam of disappointment. But Shane did not see; his eyes and mind were grimly fixed upon that outsprawled figure in the dust. His right hand dropped to gun butt and his eyes were cold and hard as he waited for the swarthy man to regain consciousness.

The girl touched his arm. "You dished him out plenty, mister. Leave him be. Tortilla Flat wouldn't call what he did no killin' crime." Her ripe red lips twisted bitterly. "He was only aimin' to spark Lize Corbin."

"I don't like to hear that kinda talk, ma'am. You go along home, now. What I cal'late to give this two-legged polecat won't be no sight for a woman's eyes to look at."

"You crazy lunkhaid! Ain't you in bad enough now with the vinegarones that run this town—"

Shane cut in, "What handle does this varmint go by?"

"That's Puerco—he's a pal of Marshal Brady. You better leave him be less'n you got a hankerin' to be planted 'fore the sun climbs outa bed."

The gleam of Shane's white teeth flashed coldly behind his parted lips. "Shucks, ma'am. Plantin' is a game that two can play."

"Not in this town. The plantin' here is all done by Brady an' Lume an' Latham—'ceptin' for what they hire out to their friends." She seemed, he thought, to want to get him away from here. Probably afraid one of those she'd named might come along. He noticed with a wave of color that in her effort to convince him of her point, she seemed to have forgotten her torn and buttonless shirt.

"You better clear out pronto—while you got a whole skin," she was saying agitatedly.

"I ain't figurin' to leave. Not yet, leastways. This town has got me interested. The cordial welcome these leadin' citizens been handin' me is right-down fetchin'. I betcha I'm goin' to be a well known man in Tor—"

"What you're goin' to be, you crazy lunkhaid, is a well-salivated corpse—lessn' you climb your hoss an' burn a trail outen here pronto!"

"Shucks, ma'am, I reckon you're some mistaken." His grin, meant to be assuring, appeared to infuriate her further. She stamped her foot and swore like an angry pirate. "All right, you fool!" Wheeling, she turned her back on him and started off. "Don't never say you wasn't warned!"

Shane let his glance play over the man he'd felled. A cold, malicious gleam entered his smoky eyes as with a groan the Mexican stirred. The swarthy face writhed painfully. Then the black eyes came blinking open. With a curse the fellow got an elbow under him. Then he saw Shane.

His lambent stare focused sharply, revealing a fiercely malignant blaze of hate as his right hand went streaking hipward toward where the walnut stock of a heavy pistol protruded from an open holster.

Shane drawled softly, "Don't do it, fella. You ain't nearly fast enough."

The swarthy man must have correctly gauged the grim earnestness of that soft drawl, for his reaching hand abruptly stilled. With a grunted oath he got to his feet. "Well?" he glared. "W'at you fixin' do now, eh?"

"I'm fixin' to give you a piece of good advice. Folks have been givin' me advice ever since I struck this town. Must be catchin' 'cause now I'm givin' you some. Just this, hombre—

don't never let me catch you in reachin' distance of Lize Corbin again. That's all. Now *git!*"

THE silver of the moonlight and the ochre of these barren mountains lent a softening languor to a country harsh and spiked by day. But Sudden Shane, as he was known in Texas, gave no attention to the appearance of this land. His glance was alert and keen as he retraced his steps toward the Square Deal, but the brightness of his gaze was not for beauty. It was for a possible hostile move on the part of some hard-case friend of one of these men he had antagonized. He did not mean to be caught napping.

When he reached Jarson Lume's establishment the place was still roaring wide and handsome, though dawn was hardly forty winks away. An all-night place in an all-night town, Shane thought. He grinned tightly, for this place was in his blood. A man's town, this, where fortunes hung on the turn of a card or the flip of a knife. A hell-hole, yes—but where life rode swift and high.

He shoved through the Square Deal's swinging doors and got his back against a wall. He stayed there till his eyes grew accustomed to the glare of the coal-oil lamps. Then, peering through the swirling haze of tobacco smoke, he made out the tall, gaunt form of Stone Latham moving toward him with Marshal Brady in his wake.

Shane stood loosely waiting, his arms hanging at his sides.

When the others brought up before him, Shane said, "Latham, you're cuttin' your string pretty short, ain't you?"

His dark and lean-carved face held mockery as Latham answered. "I don't need a long string to handle saddle tramps an' gunslicks. Don't you reckon you'd better mosey? The marshal, here, tells me he gave you till daylight to pull your freight. It's gettin' close to daylight now."

"Is it worryin' you?"

"Not me. You're the one that should be doin' the worryin', fella."

Shane laughed coldly. "Well, somehow I don't seem to be. An' I'm allowin' I'll be still in this town long after sunup, too."

Brady grunted, "That ain't no lie. I've got yore restin' place all picked out—got the coffin measured, too."

"Well, I hope you measured 'er long an' slim, Mister Two-Gun Toter," Shane drawled with a sardonic grin. "Most of the specimens I've seen in this town lean towards a railish figure, an' if anyone occupies your coffin, Brady, the corpse won't look like me."

Latham grinned at the marshal. "Looks like he's callin' yore hand, Brady. You goin' to let him get away with it?"

Brady sneered. "When the time shoves up, I'll lay him out."

"Yeah?" Shane leaned slightly forward and the smoky gray of his eyes grew darker, dangerous. His tone was low, cold, even. "This," he said ominously, "is as good a time as any, Brady. I ain't leavin'. What're you goin' to do?"

Brady's bloodshot eyes grew anxious as they studied the tranquil Texan. It was Shane's tranquillity

that seemed to bother him most. It was as though he feared Shane had somehow laid a trap for him and now was inviting him to step forward and get himself snared. His hands clenched and unclenched spasmodically while a dull red suffused his cheeks. The Adam's apple bulged in his throat, bounced grotesquely up and down—a barometer indication of the state of his nerves.

Shane's grin was taunting. There was wicked amusement in his eyes as he drawled ironically, "Latham, it looks like the cat run off with your friend's tongue. I'm waintin' to know what he's figurin' to do, now that it's settled I'm goin' to remain in town. Perhaps—" his drawl grew softer—"you'd like to take up his burden?"

"Hell," Stone Latham sneered. "I'm not enforcin' the law in this man's town! He's the one that ordered you out. It's up to him to play his hand."

Brady gulped painfully and his eyes slid away from Shane's. "It—it ain't daylight yet," he muttered lamely, and turned away.

SHANE looked after him sardonically, and grinned when he noted the redness of the lawman's ears. Then he swung his glance on Latham. "I seem to recall," he said amusedly, "that you, too, was advisin' me to drift last time we met."

Latham's lips curved in a cynical smile. "The advice still holds good. But I ain't reckonin' you'll take it. Gunfighters are all alike, to my experience. Each one thinks he can't be beat—till another gent's blue whistler cuts him down."

"D'you think the lead that'll cut me down is in your gun?"

Stone Latham shrugged. "*Quien sabe?*" he said, and walked away.

Shane snorted and climbed the stairs to the balcony. He moved unhurriedly toward the room whose door held a chalk-marked No. 10. He paused outside a moment. But hearing no sound of voices from within he grasped the knob.

The door was swung on its hinges in such a manner that it opened inward. As Shane turned the knob he gave the door a healthy shove and dropped upon the floor. And lucky that he did!

A jet of flame belched outward from the darkness of the room. Lead sang above his head as his gun was coming out and the smashing report filled the tiny room with reverberating thunder. A wicked smile creased Shane's grim lips as the hammer dropped beneath his thumb. The sound of a falling body reached his ears as booted feet stormed up the balcony stairs.

Swiftly Shane stepped into the room and struck a match. A crumpled figure lay on the floor, a smoking gun still clutched in one outflung hand. Shane studied the narrow face, but could not place it as belonging to anyone he knew.

"Reckon he's that Bill Halleck jasper I was s'posed to share this two-by-four with," he mused. "Looks like the boss-men of this town are some anxious to get me out of the way. I expect this little trap was Jarson Lume's idea of bein' playful. I wonder how much he knows."

The slap of booted feet converging on the room drew him abruptly to his feet. He snuffed the match and dropped it. Sheathing his gun he stepped out onto the balcony and saw half a dozen men sprinting toward him, Brady and Stone Latham in the lead. At his sudden appearance the running group stopped still.

"Who fired that shot?" Wolf Brady scowled.

"I did, marshal," Shane drawled evenly. "With my little pistol I fired that shot." His eyes flung a challenge at the staring group. "What you figurin' to do about it?"

"Do! Do?" the marshal spluttered. "Why, dammit, you're under arrest!"

"Take it easy. You'll be gettin' apoplexy if you don't watch out."

With a snarl Wolf Brady's hands flashed hipward and came up in gleaming arcs. But the gun that spoke was Shane's, and it spoke but once. Marshal Brady coughed and sagged. With a sob he fell to his knees, pitched forward on his face.

Weaving left and right Shane's leveled pistol menaced the group. "Anyone here feel like makin' somethin' outa this?"

They stiffened to the drive in his voice. Motionless they watched him with wooden faces.

"Shucks," he said, "ain't Brady got no friends among you?" His gray eyes, so like the smoky sage, rested invitingly on Stone Latham's. "How about you?"

"Don't look at me," Stone Latham said. "I never did like Brady, nohow."

Shane said curtly, "Two of you hombres lug Bill Halleck out of my room. I ain't never accustomed myself to sleepin' with a stiff. An' right now I'm aimin' to get some shut-eye. It won't," he added ominously, "be healthy for any gent to go perambulatin' round my door. I'm a light sleeper an' I'd hate mighty much to be disturbed."

CHAPTER IV

Lieutenants of the Lobo

BEHIND a door labeled "Private office," in a room partitioned off beneath the balcony stairs of his establishment and made as sound-proof as his dexterity and the tools he had to work with would permit, Jarson Lume and those who owned him "Boss" sat in grim conference. An atmosphere of tension hung over this gathering that was not the least bit lessened by the savage scowl on the countenance of Lume himself. Plainly the things which had happened since Shane's arrival in Tortilla Flat had upset his usual impassivity. He paced the floor with nervous stride, hands thrust deep in frock coat pockets.

Stone Latham, cold and cynical, sat at one end of the long plank table toying with a deck of greasy cards. Next to him sat the lithe and slender Puerco, his swarthy face framed by an Indian's mane of black coarse hair, a surly pout on his thick, repellent lips and a bold discoloration at the edge of his receding chin where Shane's hard fist had landed.

At Latham's other hand sat Bronc Walders, his restless glance constantly roving about the room. A slouch hat with a chin strap gave him a hardcase appearance that was ominously borne out by the shiny grip of his double-action Colt and the scuffed condition of its holster, against the unscratched black surface of his fancy batwing chaps.

Jarson Lume abruptly wheeled to face his lieutenants. Determination lay plain in the forward jut of his clean-shaved jaw.

"Gents," he said gruffly, "somethin's got to be done about this drifting gunslick. He's too damned fast for my peace of mind. We've got to get rid of him and quick. Already he's snuffed Wolf Brady and Halleck. Gents, this Shane has got to go!"

A sneer contorted Stone Latham's cynical face. "Bravo!" he jeered, and grinned as Jarson Lume's cheeks grew dark. "How you figurin' to get rid of him?"

"I wasn't thinking of askin' *you* to gun him," Lume said coldly. Concentration wrinkled his brows as he took another turn about the room. He stopped with his back against the fireplace and hooked his elbows on its dusty mantel.

He said, "I've engaged him to ride shotgun guard to a shipment of gold."

A silence settled across the room and held for a number of moments. Then Latham said, "It won't work. This Shane's too slick to be taken in by that game. You'll have to figure somethin' else. The stakes are too im-

portant to run such risk right now."

"There's bound to be a strong element of risk in dealing with a man like Shane," Lume answered. "No way of getting around it. We'll load the strong-box with rock rubble an' start him off. Kettle-Belly Dunn an' his boys will stop the stage at Keeler's Crossing—"

"They'll never cut it," Stone Latham growled. "Shane'll blast that bunch to hell! Mark my words, you've got to think up somethin' better'n that, Lume. This Shane ain't no ordinary leather-slapper. He's got brains an' knows how to use 'em. Ever notice his eyes?"

Jarson Lume's straight thin-lipped mouth grew tight. Through his teeth he said, "I'm figuring to have Wimper ride inside the stage."

Bronc Walders nodded, grinning. "That'll do it. While Shane's busy throwing lead at Dunn's bunch, Wimper can send a blue whistler through his gullet easy as rollin' himself a smoke. Hell, it'll be like takin' candy from a kid!"

But Stone Latham, apparently, was not convinced. He said no more, but the saturnine curve of his lips told plain as words what *he* thought about this plan.

"Well," Lume snarled, "what's wrong with it?"

Latham made no reply, but his shrug was eloquent.

A SOFT, peculiar knocking on the door at that moment interrupted the business before the meeting. Lume growled, "Come in!" and the door swung open abruptly and as quickly shut behind a short, squatty man with a squint in one eye and a weather-beaten face whose right cheek bulged to an oversized cud of tobacco.

"Well? What is it, Lefty?" Lume demanded.

"I got the dope on that payroll for the Copper King," Lefty Hines announced out of the corner of his mouth. "It's comin' through from Phoenix on the next up-country stage."

A feline sparkle lighted Lume's cold eyes. His companions straightened to attention.

"How many guards they sendin' with it?" Stone Latham asked.

"None!" the newcomer chuckled. "They figger it won't attract no notice if they don't guard it. Figger they'll get it through that way. Yuh know they've allus hired a bevy of shotgun guards on the other trips. When we lifted their last shipment, Obe Struthers said he would have to close down if the next shipment didn't get through."

Lume smiled coldly. "How much gold they got stored up there? Stamp mill's been running pretty regular, seems like. They ought to have quite a pile ready to go out."

"They have. Looks to me like this would be a damn fine time to stage a raid."

"Against all them guns they've got scattered around that office?" Stone Latham sneered. "You must have water on the brain!"

"Hell! We could pull it easy," Hines pointed out. "They swap shifts day an' night. All their tough guns are on the night shift. Daytimes there's on'y three fellas guardin' that office. Three fellas an' ol' Obe, himself. Cripes, yuh couldn't ask for a better lay!"

"H'm-m." Jarson Lume breathed, and took a turn about the room. "We might be able to cut it at that."

"If we got away with that gold," Bronc Walders muttered, "an' stopped their payroll, too, I'm bettin' we could buy Obe Struthers' Copper King Mine for the price of a new hat."

Hines nodded. Looking curiously at Lume, he said, "I thought yuh gave us boys strict orders to lay off that dame what runs the Come-An'-Get-It?"

Lume's cold immobile face swung toward Hines swiftly. Not a ripple of emotion crossed it. "I did." And after a brief pause during which his lambent gaze searched the squatty man's features, he added, "An' I

meant it. Lize Corbin's to be left strictly alone, far as this gang's concerned. I made one mistake in that skirt, an' I don't want her riled one damn inch further. One of these days she's gonna be worth money in my pocket."

Hines grinned mirthlessly from a corner of his mouth as his squint-eyed glance passed from Lume to Latham, and from Latham to Puerco. It flicked back to Latham, then, and he said, "I reckon that order don't include Stone Latham, eh?"

Latham grinned as Lume said coldly, "No. Latham's workin' under orders."

"I guessed he musta been when I heard how that driftin' pilgrim handled—"

"That'll be enough outa you!" Stone purred. There was a bold intentness in his glance as his hand dropped suggestively to gun butt.

"Shucks, Stone, I wa'n't meanin' nothin'," the squatty Hines said easily. "Jest tryin' to get things straight in my think-box, is all. I reckon," he tossed a jeer across the silence carelessly, "Puerco's been workin' under special orders, too?"

There came a fraction of absolute silence; then, through the shredding stillness, Puerco's breath came raspingly as he ran a shaking hand round the collar of his greasy shirt.

Stone Latham, his eyes thin slits, rose slowly from his chair. He moved softly backward from the table. The cold, bloodless face of Jarson Lume went taut.

Fingering his tiny mustache, Lume drawled, "Just what is the meanin' of that crack?" And his words fell across the hush with the metallic clink of pebbles in a box.

Hines grinned malignantly. "Yuh know that alley between the War Whoop an' the Jug o' Rum? Well, I happened to be saunterin' past it awhile back an' I heard some right peculiar sounds. I stopped. An' right then a curtain in the Jug o' Rum flew up an' lit that alley like the sun was shinin'. I seen a certain gent here wrastlin' with that Corbin dame. He had her shirt half torn off."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Well, I didn't butt in, figgerin' 'twas none o' my never-mind. Wa'n't no need of me puttin' in my oar nohow 'cause that stranger what mixed it with Latham an' rubbed Wolf Brady out was headin' for the gal an' this gent like a fire hoss when the third alarm starts ringin'. He wasn't wastin' any words neither, by cripes! He jest waded in an' bounced a coupla haymakers off this gent's chin so quick 'twould make yore haid swim." Hines looked saturninely at the shrinking Puerco.

"One damn lie!" the Mexican shrilled, kicking back his chair. "I nevair touched thees—"

Bronc Walders' hoarse laugh, like the rest of the Mexican's words, was lost in two smashing reports that burst across the room like towering thunder, beating back against the walls in deafening waves of sound.

Stone Latham and Jarson Lume both stood with smoking guns in hand as Puerco's knees buckled and spilled him, retching blood, across the floor. A wicked snarl was on Latham's lips and Jarson Lume's cold, bloodless face was taut.

Lume said, "The next sport that makes a play at Lize Corbin can expect the same. By hell, I'm runnin' this camp, an' it's high time you birds was recognizin' that when I say a thing I *mean* it! Walders, throw that carrion out in the alley."

SUDDEN SHANE had no intention of going to sleep when he shut the door of Number Ten. Nor did he. To be sure, he sat down on the bunk, took off his boots and dropped them heavily on the floor. But then he quietly put them on again. After that he settled comfortably back against the wall and built himself a smoke.

There was a whimsical light in his sage-colored eyes as he leisurely puffed his quirly. No remorse for the

men he had killed was bothering his cogitations. Those men, to his way of thinking, had received exactly what their actions merited. The first man had been loosening the reins of his horse—a trick to lure Shane into a line where the horse thief's hidden helper could cut him down.

That the scheme of this twain had not panned out was hardly any fault of theirs; they certainly had been serious enough. Yes, Shane mused, killing was no more than they deserved. He had been generous and lenient under the circumstances, having killed but one. The bullying Marshal Brady had come asking for what he got. So, too, had the bushwhacking Bill Halleck!

It was Shane's suspicion that the horse thieves had been hired by Lume to rub him out. Halleck, too. But the Marshal—well, Shane was willing to bet considerable that Brady had been sicked on him by Latham.

What was the connection—if any—between Stone Latham and Jarson Lume? Somehow he had a hunch there was a connection, that Lume and Latham were working hand in glove to part this camp from its gold and copper. And Shane, be it known, was a man who loved to give his hunches the free rein.

His thoughts swung to the man whose scribbled note had brought him to this camp. Obe Struthers, owner of the misnamed Copper King. Shane's lips quirked humorously as he thought of the mine owner's letter. It had been both brief and pointed. Four words: "Business going to hell!"

Struthers had been pretty sure that would bring the man to whom it was sent, Shane reflected. He was probably in a stew right now because the addressee had not shown up.

With a frown Shane's kaleidoscopic thoughts shifted to Lume and Latham again. He had made an enemy of Latham—perhaps of Lume. At any rate, it was beginning to be apparent that the Square Deal's proprietor was not intending to take any chances. A strange gunslick was better dead.

A knock upon the door abruptly terminated his cogitations.

"Come in," he drawled and, rising, dropped his hand to gun butt.

A gril entered—the frowsy blonde he had seen earlier with Stone Latham.

"Close the door," he said, and crossed his arms, his glance upon her painted face inquiringly.

That she had something to say, was evident; her trouble seemed to be in arriving at a satisfactory opening.

After several false starts, she blurted, "You better clear out of this camp right quick!"

He smiled in a way all his own. "Ah," he said, and blew a cloud of smoke ceilingward. "Nice of you to tell me."

"I'm dead serious. Stone Latham will kill you if you don't!"

Shane appeared calm and indifferent. "I wouldn't let that worry you none, ma'am. After all, I been weaned a week or two an' ought to be trusted to know what I'm doin'. I've been in camps like this before. An' Stone Latham ain't the first of his kind I've had a run-in with. I reckon I'll get along."

She came suddenly toward him where he stood beside the bunk and placed her hand upon his arm. "You're so young," she said. "So young and honest looking. I—I'd hate to see you killed."

Shane grinned at her, coldly. "What the—" he broke off as a double concussion shook the floor beneath his feet.

The girl caught a hand to her carmined lips; her eyes stared wide and frightened.

"Just some of the boys celebratin', I reckon," Shane said. "Nothin' to get alarmed about, I expect. Does Latham know you're up here?"

Her hazel eyes reproached him. "Listen," she said, coming closer. "You don't know what you're up against here. Stone Latham—"

"What's the game, kid?" He reached up and caught her hands to ward them off.

She threw herself against him and began to struggle. Her lips parted in a scream that sent tingling chills across Shane's scalp. There was some trick about this business, was the thought that crossed his mind.

And while his hands still gripped her twisting wrists and her body was jammed close against his own, as though to prove his thought correct the door bulged open. Across the girl's bare shoulder his eyes met the bold, sardonic stare of Stone Latham.

"Well," Latham breathed. "You damned woman-thievin' polecat!"

Even as Latham's hand sped downward for his gun Shane, with what seemed a miracle of dexterity, flung himself loose of the cursing girl and slapped his hip.

A visible shudder ran through Stone Latham's rawboned body and his descending hand was arrested midway in its swooping arc. His widening eyes hung as though fascinated to the black orifice of the pistol which, like magic, had appeared in Shane's right hand.

A cold, mirthless grin framed Shane's white teeth.

"Almost, hombre — almost," he drawled. "But not exactly quite. One of these times I might get a little careless an' your friends'll be luggin' you out on a shutter."

CHAPTER V

"G Stands for Gun!"

THE sun, gilding in its passing the brazen upthrust crags of the Superstition Mountains, and gilding, endowing them for fleeting moments with cloaks of gold and lilac, was slinking off to bed when Sudden Shane opened his eyes and yawned. Throwing his denim-clad legs across the edge of this bunk that once had been Bill Halleck's, and tugging on his boots, Shane crossed to the open window and stood there looking out and breathing in great pungent drafts of the cooling, invigorating air.

Night's coming would be swift, he mused. And swifter still would be Death's coming and the sinister slither of his sickle snuffing souls in this place of turbulence and greed once the darkness fell.

Shane shrugged away the thought and moving from the window turned his attention to a careful inspection of his gun. It did not seem to have been tampered with while he slept, but he could afford to take no chances. Emptying the bullets from its chambers, he replaced them with fresh ones picked alternately from the loops of his wide black belt. Then, holstering the weapon, he pulled his hat low down across his eyes and, opening the door, went out upon the balcony overlooking the bar, gambling layouts and dancing floor beneath.

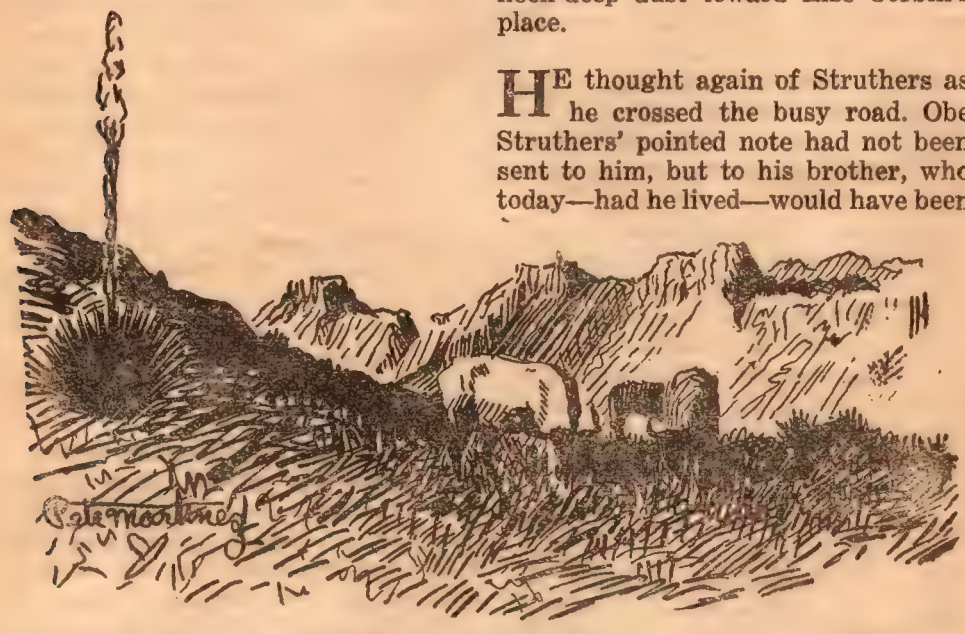
He stood for some time by the railing, letting his somber, wary glance play over the sights below. The outsides of the Square Deal's windows now were blackened by the garish light of the fifty coal-oil lamps that were bracketed along its inner walls. Below Shane, streaky stratas of lazy-swirling tobacco smoke drifted above the hatted heads of the variegated throng patronizing the many pleasures offered by Jarson Lume's establishment.

Playing stud at a table almost directly below him, Shane saw the blond girl who, early this morning, had almost given Stone Latham the chance he was wanting. She was sheathed in some clinging material of pale blue that made alluring contrast to her yellow hair. In the latter, now, she wore a high-backed Spanish comb asparkle with imitation gems.

Three men were with her. One was a paunchy gent whose right hand

seemed to love the handle of his gun; another had restless straw-colored eyes, sneering lips and a chin strap on his hat, while the last member of the male trio was a sawed-off man with close-set eyes in a pockmarked visage that was evil as any Shane had ever seen.

This last-mentioned hombre caught Shane's glance upon them and muttered something under his breath. His companions suddenly looked up. Seeing Shane, the man with he chin strap scowled. Then all three returned their attention to their game. Shane continued to watch them for a while, but finally tired of it and descended the stairs.



He threaded a leisurely way among the gambling tables and thirsty customers, and headed for the bar. Even in a camp of this sort, he reflected, it seemed a bit unusual for a resort to be so heavily patronized at this early hour. For a time he speculated on the matter while he studied the boisterous throng, but finally gave it up and shoved through the Square Deal's swinging doors.

Night, he saw as he stood beneath Lume's wooden awning, had already veiled much of the sordid ugliness which stamped by day the physical dimensions of Tortilla Flat. But he found nothing beautiful in it even now. This place, he reflected, was a very paradise for outlaws and hunted men of all descriptions. Only one law could function here—the harshly sudden law of Colonel Colt. And listening to the nocturnal sounds about him, he opined that it was a law that functioned regularly.

He became aware that he was hungry and turned his steps through the hock-deep dust toward Lize Corbin's place.

HE thought again of Struthers as he crossed the busy road. Obe Struthers' pointed note had not been sent to him, but to his brother, who today—had he lived—would have been just eight yeares older than Sudden Shane. But Jefferson Shane had been killed four years ago by drygunch lead. Evidently Struthers had not heard. Struthers and Jeff had once been pardners. So Sudden Shane had come to Tortilla Flat at Struthers' call in his brother's stead. The Shanes had always been noted for things like that. In Texas it was said that when a Shane once called you "friend," he'd fight for you till hell froze over—and then skate for you on the ice. Sudden Shane was a man who believed in keeping up traditions.

When he entered the Come-An'-Get-It, he saw that the place was filling up.

A good dozen customers bestrode the stools along the oilcloth-covered counter. Taking one of the few still vacant stools, Shane leaned forward on his elbows and grinned at the bustling girl.

When she got around to it, Lisabet came and stared at him inquiringly. "Well, speak up, stranger. You ain't the only pebble on this beach!"

Shane chuckled. "I'll take some eggs fried sunny-side-up on a raft of ham. An' a cup of java. An' some apple pie, ma'm. How's business? Flourishin'?"

An angry light flared in her stormy eyes. "Good as could be expected—considerin' you're still hangin' round an' bumpin' off my best customers!" And with an expressive sniff, she went off about her work.

Shane thoughtfully rasped his chin with a lazy finger. "Pretty sassy," he reflected, "considerin' the scrape I got her out of las' night. Reckon that old saw 'bout whistlin' gals an' crowin' hens ain't far from wrong," he concluded enigmatically.

The man on the stool beside Shane gave him a grin. "Can't noways satisfy that dame," he observed through a champing mouthful. "Coldest critter on earth, bar none. Even Lume can't get no place with her—an' that's sayin' somethin'."

Shane nodded without comment. So Lume *had* been monkeyin' around! Was he the polecat who had put the sullen resentment in Lize Corbin's eyes?

He reached out and caught the plates and cup she sent slithering down the counter, loaded with his order. He dumped four spoonsful of sugar in his coffee and began the serious business of "feeding his face."

One by one his companions finished their meals, grabbed toothpicks and sauntered out, leaving their money beneath their plates. He watched the girl clear the dirtied dishes from the counter, disappear with them into the kitchen. When she returned she stopped before him and leaned against the counter, eyeing him soberly.

"I didn't get a chance to thank you for what you done last night," she said. "I'm thankin' you now."

Shane flushed. "Shucks, ma'am, don't be mentionin' it. I'd have done the same for anybody." And his flush grew hotter as he saw the old resentment flare up in her eyes and realized he'd put his foot square into things again.

"Yes," she said with stormy glance, "I reckon you'd 'a' done it for any—"

But there he cut her off. "Don't say it, ma'am. 'Twouldn't be noways fittin' an,' besides, the hard cases round this town that had orn'ry notions have begun to opine as how they mebbe made a mistake in readin' your brand. They're beginnin' to figure mebbe they've had you all wrong plumb from the start. Ain't no sense runnin' yourself down when other folks is startin' to run you up."

"The only reason they're figurin' to run me up is account of you. I reckon you are some shucks with a gun, Shane. Looks like most of the salty hairpins in this camp is right anxious to keep outa your way since you downed Wolf Brady an' Wild Bill Halleck. But I ain't allowin' that's helpin' me none. They'll keep their dirty tongues off'n me all right, when you're around. But when you leave they'll come snarlin' round ag'in."

"If I heard a gent make a remark about you that I didn't like, I expect I'd bend my gun on him quick. Shucks," Shane gravely added. "Trouble with you, ma'am, you're lettin' ancient hist'ry obscure the silver linin' of your cloud."

"Well, the trouble with *you* is you ain't got sense enough to know when you've reached the limit. This sportin' crowd here'll git set sudden an' *pssssst!* There be a *bam*, some flame an' a puff of smoke an' you'll be plumb washed up an' in your coffin! I'm a-tellin' you! I've seen it happen before. There ain't no gent tough enough to

buck this camp an' get away with it. Shane, your ridin' for a fall!"

Shane only chuckled amusedly. "I reckon not—"

"Jest like all the rest the men!" she flashed. "Confident as Billy-be-damned an' plumb stiff-necked as hell! If you had any sense, you'd git right outa this sink of iniquity an' settle down on some nice quiet ranch an' mind your own business."

Shane's eyes twinkled. He had a ranch of his own back in Texas right this minute. But he held his face sober as he looked Lize Corbin in the eye. There was no need of airing the fact, he thought.

"Why, ma'am," he gravely drawled, "I reckon I'm a box-head for not thinkin' somethin' like that sooner. I'm plumb mortified a lady had to point it out to me."

She regarded him suspiciously, as though sensing laughter in his words. But his face was faintly flushed and showed no sign of mirth.

"Where do you reckon I could get me such a place," he asked, "in case I decide to do that little thing?"

"How do I know? Use your ears! Use your eyes! There oughta be plenty of spreads for sale. Lume an' his tough guns has raised so much deviltry in this country I allow you oughta be able to pick up a place right cheap. Course the on'y way you could keep it stocked would be with a hard-case crew what didn't give a damn for gold-minin'. Everyone round thisaway has done got gold colic bad. Couldn't git 'em to work at no ordinary chore for all hell. I allow there'll be one hellimonious passel of paupers in this country when this boom curls up."

"Well, ma'am," Shane said, bowing to her and slipping some money under his plate, "I reckon I'll go put my ear to the ground an' see what I can discover along them lines." He glanced at his timepiece. "Yep, I reckon I better be siftin' along."

"I expect you better be siftin' quick. Stone Latham is crossin' the street an' he's got company. If you an' him is figgerin' to have a ruckus, I'd admire for you to have it outside. These fixin's here cost me money."

BUT he could tell by her strained expression that it was not the fixings she was worried about, but him. She was anxious for him to get away without a meeting with the saturnine Latham. He wondered if she knew about the run-in they'd had this morning in the Square Deal's room number ten. He decided that she didn't, since it would be unlike his conception of Stone Latham for the man to air a thing so greatly to his discredit. This morning Latham had had all the breaks, yet his gun had not come out of leather. Either Latham's nerve had snapped at the crucial moment, or native caution had bidden him stay his hand.

Shane looked at the girl. Concern lay plain in the pale rigidity of her cheeks. For some reason she evidently did not want him to engage Stone Latham in a gun battle. He couldn't see why she should be concerned—unless it was because of what he had done for her, and she feared Latham's friends might throw in too and down him. He dismissed the matter with a careless shrug.

"I can't run away, ma'am. What has to be has to be. This is one of them situations that has to be brazened out. I reckon I'll just wait an' see what they got on their minds."

"You dang lunkhaid!" she flared. "I reckon you're tryin' to get yourself killed off!"

"Shucks," he drawled gently, "it's uncommon hard, ma'am, to dodge a shoot-out by hustlin' off. Them fellas'd figure I was aimin' to cut my stick an' they'd put a wrong interpretation on it. They'd—"

"Git killed, then, if it'll be any satisfaction to you!" she snapped, and flounced back into the kitchen.

Shane grinned ruefully. "Sure is a spitfire," he marveled.

But his face grew quickly sober as boots clumped heavily across the board walk outside.

Stone Lathan pushed through the door, followed by two other men who crowded on his heels. There were scowls on the faces of the latter, but Latham's features were wreathed in a saturnine smirk.

"Howdy, Shane," was his greeting. "Like to have you meet a coupla friends of mine—Birch Alder an' Shoshone Mell. Boys, this is S. G. Shane."

Shane nodded coolly, but did not offer to shake hands. "Howdy," he said, and waited, his hands hanging loosely at his sides.

"So you are Shane, are you? You are makin' quite a rep," Alder drawled staring curiously.

"It ain't my fault if folks round here wants to commit suicide," Shane said modestly. "I do my best to avoid these things but—"

Alder shot a stream of tobacco juice between his broken teeth. "Humph!" he sneered and, moving forward, climbed upon a stool.

Shane turned a little to keep all three men within his vision. He did not like that "Humph!" of Alder's, nor did he like the fellow's move. It seemed to him just a bit too deliberate, as though the thing had been according to some prearranged plan.

He looked Birch Alder over carefully. He was a solidly built man, muscular, and heavy of face. Years of the wrong kind of thought had drawn a corner of his mouth downward until his coarse features held a perpetual sort of leer. There was a sneaking droop to his big shoulders that spelled "Gunfighter"—an epithet backed by his two bone-handled Colts in tied-down holsters.

The other man, Shoshone Mell, was a lanky, thin-lipped hombre who moved with a slouching shuffle. A cropped black mustache adorned his upper lip which, when taken in conjunction with the tuft of black hair on his chin, gave him a cast of countenance extremely reminiscent of the face of Lucifer. His dark and sunken eyes held smoldering fires in their gleaming depths. And Shane saw notches on the worn handle of his gun.

"Looks like you are travelin' in big-time company," Shane said to Latham with a grin.

Latham grinned back felinely. "I always travel in big-time company," he boasted. "Lume still got you on his payroll?"

"No, but he doesn't know it yet. I quit five minutes ago."

A shadow crossed Latham's features, but vanished instantly. "A good thing," he approved. "The sooner you get out of this town the longer you'll have to keep on eatin'."

"Ain't nothing the matter with my appetite," Shane said cheerfully.

"There will be if you ain't on your way, right quick," was Latham's significant reply. "When you leavin'?"

Shane looked at Latham's two gunfighters an' drawled, "I'm figurin' to leave right now, if it's all the same to you."

"Glad to see you showin' sense," Latham said, and sneered. "I allowed you'd see the light."

"What light?"

"The light my friends here make."

"Shucks," Shane drawled softly. "You wasn't allowin' as how they could *make* me leave, was you? 'Cause if you was, I reckon I'll stay on awhile."

"Aah," Birch Alder sneered, "he's jest blowin', boss. You wantin' me to run him out?"

Shane said quickly, "I'd admire to see you try." And his gun gaped wickedly at Birch Alder's middle.

The gunman's mouth fell open in surprise an' consternation. "Geez," he muttered. "Where'd you hev that hid?"

Shane grinned and, like a wink his gun was back in leather. The movement had been so swift no eye had followed it. Latham's men stared

blankly. Latham sneered as Birch Alder asked, in a voice newly tinged with respect, "What'd you say yore name was, mister?"

"Shane—S. G. Shane."

"What's the 'G' for?" Shoshone Mell chipped in.

"Gun."

Birch Alder heaved a sigh. "I'll hev to take my hat off to yore speed," he said reluctantly. "You sure are sudden!"

"That," drawled Shane with a cold, tight grin, "is what the 'S' stands for."

CHAPTER VI

Bullet Bait

IN these last few days Jarson Lume had noticed a change in himself He had become aware of a latent sense of caution of which, hitherto, he had not known himself possessed. It was disturbing—very. And it dated, he felt bitterly, from the arrival of this hombre, Sudden Shane!

Jarson Lume's straight thin-lipped mouth twisted venomously as he grimly eyed the circle of men about him. He had summoned these lieutenants of his to find if anything had been learned of Shane's movements since he had abruptly left town two days ago. The reports they had given him were lame and entirely inadequate. Stripped of subterfuge and alibi, such discoveries as these brainless fools had made were absolutely valueless. Not a single man of the bunch had any idea where Shane had gone. The fellow had veritably dropped from sight!

"Too bad you birds ain't got any eyes in your heads," Lume lashed them. "To hear you jaspers talk, a gent would think the damn earth had developed a mouth an' swallered him—boots, spurs an' pistol!"

Birch Alder snarled something under his breath and clenched his fists.

Lefty Hines swore softly.

"Mebbe you could do better," Stone Latham sneered. "If you got out an' tried, mebbe you'd work off some of that fat you been gatherin' lately!"

An abashed silence settled tensely down across the room. Through it the men's breathing sounded harsh and rasping while Jarson Lume slowly rose from his chair and faced Stone Latham.

Latham's cheeks went gray, but he stood his ground, the sneer still on his lips.

From behind the towering crags of the Superstition Range the dying sun threw splotches of gold and saffron across the splintery floor, and stained the window glass with lilac. Jarson Lume noted these things subconsciously as he somberly eyed his lieutenant and strove to find the right phrase with which to nip in the bud, so to speak, the flare of mutinous defiance to be sensed in Latham's words, and even more in Latham's tone.

The silence grew so long-drawn as to be almost insupportable before at last Lume spoke. And when he did, his husky voice shoved his words across the hush with the grating rasp of a rusty file:

"Latham," he said, "I've killed men for less than that—squashed 'em like I would a scorpion. By rights, I ought to rub you out! An' I would if you wasn't the only man with guts in his belly of all this mongrel breed. Now you clamp a latigo on that tongue of yours, by hell, or I'll cut it out!"

Again cold silence crept across the room, and only the mournful soughing of the wind through the cottonwoods outside disturbed it. Hot color flooded Latham's cheeks and a red fog was across his eyes. But he held his tongue.

And then Bronc Walders' voice ran hurriedly across the stillness:

"Yuh know, I've been thinkin', chief—this Shane pelican won quite a bit of money before he pulled his

stake. Won it at one of the poker tables here. I was playin'. Like I said, I've been doin' a heap of thinkin' since then an' I figger there was a reason why Shane kep' pilin' up the chips."

Lume regarded him steadily. "Spill it."

"Wal," Walders hesitated, glanced uneasily at Stone Latham and abruptly blurted, "Latham's woman was settin' in on that game!"

Lume turned the information over slowly, scanning it from various angles. Suddenly in the dim far reaches of his mind a subtle thought clicked into place. The lambent eyes in the cold, bloodless mask that was his face glowed with a new suspicion as they probed Stone Latham's. "Go on, Bronc. You interest me strangely."

"Well, as I recall it, Shane won every time that damn blond hellcat dealt."

Latham took a half step forward, menace in every line of his angular rawboned body, his right hand spread clawlike above his holstered pistol. His bold eyes swam with wrath as they fixed themselves on Walders' grinning face.

He opened his mouth and ripped out, "You lyin' buzzard!"

Lume, watching them, saw the gloating look fade swiftly from Bronc Walders' countenance. A sinister leer took its place as his hand, too, slid hipward. Jarson Lume swore through locked teeth. "Git your hands away from them damn guns!" he snarled. His snaky eyes glowed with a wicked fury. "The first fool to put his paw to iron'll die!"

BRONC WALDERS spared him a lightning glance and relaxed, grinning. He had seen the black snout of Lume's derringer leveled with stiff malignance from the gambler's hip and knew that for the present he was safe. Stone Lathem was never the man to sign his own death warrant.

"I'm countin' three, Latham," Lume purred ominously.

With a snarl Latham removed his hand from the proximity of his thigh and the look he snapped at Lume was bitter. "Can't you see what this lousy saddle tramp's up to?" he jeered. "He's tryin' to split us up, to turn one man ag'in' the other. Look at the way he got us to wipe out Puerco!"

Lume shifted his flinty gaze to Walders' face. "H'm'm. Just what you mean by that?"

"We don't know," growled Latham, "that what he said about Puerco was true any more'n these lies he's passin' 'bout Gracie. I know damn well Gracie wouldn't double-cross us like he's puttin' on!"

"You never can tell what a woman'll do," Lume observed coldly. "Mebbe she didn't pass him the card to take them pots an' mebbe she did. But one thing's certain—Shane nicked me for eight thousand bucks. Somethin's screwy somewhere!"

"What object could she have to pull a stunt like that?" Latham demanded hotly.

Lume looked at Walders.

Bronc Walders said, "I figger she thought mebbe Shane was figgerin' to gun Latham an' wanted some way to get him outa town quick. I allow she reckoned that if Shane won a pile of jack he'd fan dust pronto." He added pointedly, "He sure fanned dust."

"Why, you orn'ry hound!" Latham snarled. "There ain't no damn two-legged jackass can beat—"

"Sit down!" Venom oozed from the husky voice with which Jarson Lume shoved his words across Stone Latham's brag. "Sit down an' git a latigo on that jaw of yours before I bust it plumb off!"

Latham sank sullenly into a chair and glowered at Walders between slitted eyes. The muscles along his jaw stood out like strands of rope. A vein throbbed heavily on his left temple. When not in the grip of rage or excitement, Jarson Lume took pride in his enunciation and always tried to use words that would do him credit and give him the front of a good edu-

cation—a thing he had never had. The present occasion was an instance of this vanity.

"Now," he said precisely, looking at Stone Latham, "it was not Walders who gave us that line on Puerco. It was Hines, here, as you'd have remembered had you paused for a moment's reflection. You have an annoying habit of going off half cocked, friend. Now this skirt angle is a thing I mean to go into carefully. There's something uncommon odd about this business—particularly the way in which this fellow, Shane, disappeared. One minute he's here and the next he's gone. Smacks too much of magic. Like his draw.

"Alder!" he lifted his voice an octave, but its huskiness remained. "You go tell Gracie I want to see her right away. You'll likely find her in her room upstairs if she's not on duty."

After Birch Alder's muscular body had vanished through the door the stillness came half-heartedly creeping back, as though fearful of what it would find. Suprised at lack of violence in this abode of sudden death, it curled around the room and settled down among the shadows, adding to the general air of gloom an atmosphere of waiting—a brooding, hushed expectancy that brought cold chills to more than one back as man watched man in narrow-eyed alertness, and Jarson Lume watched all.

It was nearly dark outside. In the room the thickening murk was interspersed at intervals by the glowing points of cigarettes as first one man and then another warmed his lungs with the mellow fragrance of good Bull Durham.

CLUMPING boots presently approached the door and it was flung open, letting in a long lean bar of light from the lamplit bar beyond. A girl entered with a swish of silken skirt and was swiftly followed by Birch Alder who closed the door behind them.

"Let's have a light here," Lume said curtly.

A pair of matches burst red across the gloom as two men reached for lamps. When they were lit and their yellow radiance had driven back the shadows, Lume fixed his lambent glance upon the girl.

"Well, Gracie, what have you got to say for yourself?"

"What do you mean?" Her cheeks were pale and there were deep circles beneath her eyes.

"Bronc Walders here suggests that you manipulated the cards the other night so that Shane was able to walk out of here with eight thousand of my dinero."

The girl looked at Lume with a haunting fear in her eyes. All color had washed from her face, causing her carmined lips to stand out like a smear of blood.

"That's not so," she whispered, backing away. "I tried every trick I know to break his luck. But he was too slick. He was wise to all my stunts an' a few others besides. When he cashed in—"

Lume purred wickedly. "Are you tryin' to tell me, Gracie, you let a drifting gunslick outdeal you at your own game?"

"Before heaven," she cried desperately, "I did my best!" She flashed a glance at Latham, at Walders and whirled wildly upon the gambler. "What's that damned renegade tryin' to do? Turn you against Stone Latham?"

Bronc Walders laughed.

Jarson Lume eyed him coldly. "I don't know what he's tryin' to do," he said, "but I've a notion some sucker in this outfit is tryin' to double-cross me. An' if I catch 'em at it, it's going to be almighty unhealthy for 'em!"

"If you're talkin' to me," Stone Latham sneered, "you can save your breath. If you don't like my style I know plenty other gents that'd jump at the chance to have me with 'em.

An' gents who ain't in the habit of pinchin' nickels till the buffalo howls."

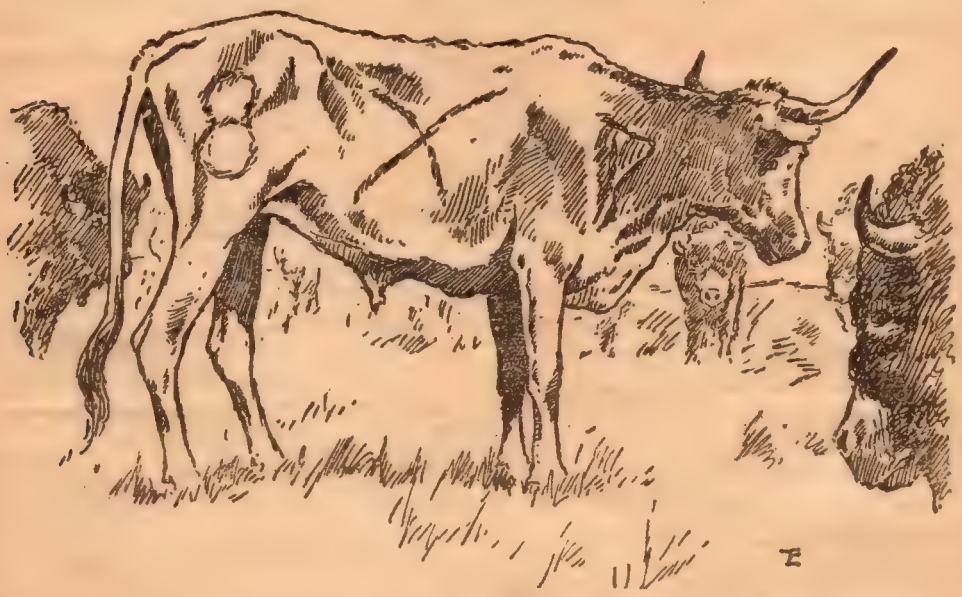
Jarson Lume got slowly to his feet and his eyes were ugly. "Are you meanin' to insinuate I'm a cheap sport?"

Stone Latham's lantern jaw thrust forward. "It goes like it lays," he gritted. "I've worked with you a long while here an' there, Jarson Lume. I've done things you couldn't hire another to do. I've pulled plenty chestnuts outa your fire. But I've never yet run with an outfit what was so uncommon quick at puttin' another gent in the wrong.

"This mangy pack of coyotes have been snarlin' round my heels long enough. Either you're callin' 'em off or I'm cuttin' my stick! I ain't used to havin' guys put watchdogs on my trail. If you don't cotton to my style no more, put Bronc Walders in my job—he seems to have a right gusty hankerin' for it. I allow 'twould be interestin' to see if he could fill it."

A tense cold stillness shut down and hemmed the tableau in. It was like a scene from a wax museum. Bronc Walders with his glittering eyes and ugly scowl; Latham standing gaunt and motionless with his right hand spread above his gun butt; Kettle-Belly Dunn with his wooden features; Lefty Hines with his face bulged about an oversized chew of Brown's Mule; Birch Alder, ready to back Latham's play; Shoshone Mell, slouching beside the door, and Jarson Lume with no more expression on his bloodless, darkly handsome face than might have been read in a sandstone crag.

The blond Gracie stood with clenched hands, her pleading glance



on Latham's face, terrified lest he draw and be snuffed out by Lume's hired killers. And beside her the pock-marked Wimper with his hand about the haft of a knife.

IN this situation but a spark was needed to set off the dynamite of flaring passions. And a spark was swiftly furnished; a spark that effected the threatened break and massacre as sandbags do a leaking dike; a spark that fused these mounting enmities and jealousies into a strong united front against the outlander.

The door banged violently open.

The eyes of every person in that room fixed amazedly upon the dusty, panting man who stood framed against the barroom light.

He was a big, huge mountain of a man, with bushy-browed black eyes in a swarthy copper face. He was garbed in the picturesque regalia of the California dons—silk lavender shirt, embroidered waistcoat, red sash, wine velvet-and-silver slash-bottomed trousers. A fine sombrero was pushed far back on his head and secured beneath his pugnacious chin by a buckskin thong looped through a perforated 'dobe dollar. As he stared around at the motionless figures he wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of a hand, and grinned.

"*Buenas noches, amigos.*"

Lume's husky voice shoved through the silence, "What are you doing here, Tularosa?"

The Mexican doffed his sombrero in a rakish bow to the girl, then stood twirling it by its chin thong as his eyes held those of Jarson Lume. "I tell you, senor, sometheeng 'as 'appen' that makes me of the heart sad—yes, ver-ry. I am come for tell you of eet."

"Well, get on with the tellin'," muttered Bronc Walders, and got an enigmatic look from Latham and a scowl from Tularosa.

Lume said, "Yes. We're busy here."

"Beezee, eh? Wal, you weel be more beezee w'en I tell you some damn fool have bought our ranch at Keeler's Crossing—"

"What!" Cold fury was concentrated in that single word Lume drove at the grinning Mexican.

"*Si*, some Tehanno 'as bought the place for the back taxes. *Seguro si.* It ees the trut'."

Latham asked, "The Keeler's Crossin' spread we use for lettin' the brands heal on our rustled stock?"

The Mexican bobbed his head, still grinning.

Bronc Walder's eyes got smoky and threatening. "An' you let 'im move in, I reckon. What's so damned funny?"

"Fonny?" Tularosa shrugged with Latin grace and spread his hands. "I'm theenk you weel call it the one damn good joke w'en I tell you that thees hombre who bought the rancho, he's fella called Shane. An' I'm theenk you weel laugh som' more w'en I say that thees Shane tell me Senor Lume ees w'at-you-call setteeng heem up in beeznez."

Gracie swore in a most unladylike manner. "He told me when he cashed his chips that night he was aimin' to buy himself a ranch!"

An oath formed on Stone Latham's compressed lips. "Sure—" he stared at Lume—"I told you that pelican was smart! You see what he's done? He's beat this place out of a grubstake an' for back taxes, that *you* insisted we shouldn't pay. He's bought the key ranch in our relay string and at one move thrown a spoke in our wheel that'll put us plumb outa business as far as cattle are concerned until we pry him loose!"

Jarson Lume took one long step that brought his face within inches of Stone Latham's. He snarled, "Shut your mouth, you loose-jawed fool! You tryin' to tell the whole damn Flat? I'm runnin' this show an' I don't need no advice outa you!"

He whirled on Tularosa as Latham' cheeks went pale with anger. "You—" Lume jabbed the Mexican's chest with a rigid finger—"Take Wimper an' burn the wind gettin' back to Keeler's Crossin'." His cold eyes flashed about the group and finally settled on Kettle-Belly Dunn.

"Dunn," he snapped, "you c'rral your boys an' follow Tularosa. I want that meddlin' slat-sided Shane rubbed out. I don't want to see any of you birds round the Flat again till you can bring me back his scalp!"

AS he rode through the blue silver of the waning night, bent upon the mission Lume had given him, the burly Tularosa's chin sagged forward on his chest and his eyes became mere squinting slits behind the smoke spiraling from the corn husk *cigarro* hanging pendulent from his thick red lips. Tularosa was communing with

himself and his thoughts were far from pleasant.

It was a miserable thing, he was telling himself, that a dog of a gringo like Jarson Lume could snap his fingers and watch men jump to obey his wishes. It was extremely distasteful to think that he himself was one of those who jumped. More, it was damnable—surely all the devils in hell were laughing!

What had this Jarson Lume that he himself did not have? Brains? Pah! He had brains enough to fill two such skulls as the head of the grasping Lume. Guns? He had as many guns as Lume, and men who were as quick to use them.

He scowled at the black mass of horsemen riding about him. It was very quiet. Only the jingling of spurs and the creaking of saddle leather and the muffled beat of the ponies' hoofs disturbed the eternal stillness that is ever associated with Arizona nights. In the far distance a coyote's howl rang thinly.

Tularosa asked himself why he should be risking his life against a man like Shane because Lume had issued certain orders? What was Lume to him? Nothing—less than nothing! A damned dog of a slave driver who squeezed the last drop of profit from all transactions before throwing his men the empty pulp, as a man might toss a bone to a pack of mongrel dogs!

Over his shoulder he sent a glance at the double line of steeple-hatted horsemen riding behind him with the moonlight glistening on their rifle barrels and their crossed belts of gleaming shells. His countrymen, all but two. He shifted his gaze to one of the latter, the paunchy dealer in wet cattle who was riding beside him, Kettle-Belly Dunn.

To himself Tularosa sneered. This Dunn was a witless fool, a plodding clod content to carry out Lume's orders all his life instead of using what brains he had been endowed with to advance his position in life.

Carramba! He—Manuel Tularosa—was a man of vision, a man who could see a vaster profit in this enterprise with himself as the directing genius. He asked himself why he should not take the bit between his teeth and permanently take over the command of this rabble riding in his wake? *Madre de Dios!* It was certainly an idea. But this dog of a Dunn—what of him? Would he lend his support to Tularosa's plan?

He touched Dunn's arm, spoke soft, suave words close to the gringo's ear: "For many nights we haff worked for the Señor Lume, my frand. What do we haff to show for thees so-dangerous labor, eh? Theenk of the larger profit we could make if we were working for ourselves. *Carramba!* There would be no limit to our power!"

Dunn vouchsafed him a sour glance and spat from the far corner of his mouth. "Yeah? An' what would Jarson Lume be doin'? D'ye think he'd be sittin' round twiddlin' his fingers?" He sneered derisively. "Don't be a fool!"

"*Sangre de Dios!*" Tularosa snapped his fingers contemptuously. "The Señor Lume does not own Manuel Tularosa! Who ees thees grasping gringo that we should jump through the hoop for heem? Thees Shane ees dangerous hombre. I haff talked weeth heem. Would you weesh for die, señor?"

"Hell, death's the common lot," sneered Dunn. "When my time comes shovin' round the bend, I expect I'll go out like I've lived—with my boots on an' a gun in my paw."

"*Si,* thees Shane weel keel you sure! Thees Shane ees—"

"Hell, he ain't so much," Dunn sneered. "Quit frettin' about him. We got plenty of men to wipe him out. What's eatin' on yuh?"

"Plenty. I do not like thees dog of a Jarson Lume. I do not like the way he combs hees hair; I do not like hees black mustache, nor hees flinty eye. In short, my frand, I do not like heem

a-tall! I am not the peon to be driven like the plough-horse! I, Manuel Tularosa, am a man of vision, a man of brain, a—"

"What a hombre!" chuckled Dunn derisively.

"You are right," said Tularosa felinely. "I am a man of guts. I say we should thumb the nose at Jarson—"

"An' I say," began Dunn belligerently, and stopped with a choking sob as Tularosa's right hand swung forward like a striking adder and sunk a knife to the hilt in his left breast.

"What you say don' matter, frand," grunted the Mexican, withdrawing his blade and wiping it on Dunn's vest.

A moment later Dunn reeled and toppled headlong from the saddle. Tularosa held up his hand for a halt and the double line of bandits stopped their horses. The nearer man stared at Tularosa curiously. They had no love for the fat gringo he had stabbed, but were unable to comprehend the killing and were filled with a vague uneasiness.

Tularosa's white teeth flashed in his copper face as he drew the reins of Dunn's pony to a steeple-hatted rider.

"My frands," Tularosa said, "we are no longer fools to be led by the nose. Lume thees, Lume that—all the time Lume, Lume, Lume! From here out we work independently, robbing whom

we please an' dividing the entire spoils among ourselves. I, Manuel Tularosa, shall lead you to amazing riches, to wealth uncountable. To hell weeth the gringo peeg!"

Viva Tularosa! Viva Tularosa!" rang the shouts, and he who shouted loudest was the renegade gringo, Wimper, and the jet eyes glowed in his pockmarked face. Kettle-Belly Dunn had been his closest friend.

CHAPTER VII

A Tough Trio

SUDDEN SHANE had bought his ranch in haste and now was finding ample time on his hands for repentance. This spread at Keeler's Crossing, he had found after buying it sight unseen, was in need of considerable repair. There was work enough in sight to take care of a full crew of cowboys. And he was finding now what Lize Corbin had pointed out to him when suggesting he buy a ranch—that punchers in this country at this time were scarcer than crow's teeth on the Painted Desert.

He had managed to pick up one man on a hurried trip to Globe. But the fellow had such a hangdog cast of countenance that he looked more like a surely stage robber than he did an honest hand. He gave his name as Alibi Smith and said he'd answer to it. Looking him over, Shane had opined Smith had corraled the habit of excusin' himself soon's he'd stepped out of the cradle.

"But dang it, I hev to!" Smith had expostulated. "Folks take one good look at me an' start sprinklin' salt on every word I say. Hell, if I could sue my pan for libel I'd be one of the richest men in the country! I can't hold no job down, nohow. An' I'm a A-1 worker, too! Every time somethin's missin' round a place folks just nacherly paw my duffle over to see did I hook it!"

Shane chuckled at the recollection. He and Smith were seated beneath the strip of wooden awning which served the adobe ranch house as a porch. It was nearing noon of a hot day. Smith had just knocked off working on the corral which, like everything else about the place, was in need of attention.

"I reckon," Shane observed, looking interestedly at his new hand, "that your life, Smith, must have had a lot of ups an' downs' eh?"

"Wal—Smith scratched his head, then pulled his hat down low above his eyes and wrinkled his long nose— "I dunno about the ups, but I allow I've had a heap more downs than usually falls to the lot of mortal man. Mr. Shane, I've shore had a powerful lot of downs."

"Durin' some of the down periods of your life," Shane commented slyly, "I s'pose you have met up with a number of hard-case characters."

"Wal—" Smith rubbed his nose reminiscently—"a few that was tolerable hard," he admitted cautiously.

"I've got to get more men," Shane confided. "I've a notion they'll have to be pretty tough to do me any good. I'm expectin' a young war round here most any time. I—Who's that comin' over there?"

Smith looked the way Shane pointed and saw a horseman splashing across the creek. The stranger seemed in no apparent hurry, yet he was moving right along and appeared to be heading directly toward them. "It ain't no hairpin *I* ever seen before," Smith denied.

As the stranger neared them, Shane looked him over from head to foot. He looked thin as the brand on the Fence Rail cattle, and he was angular and blessed with protruding front teeth that seemed constantly trying to pry his lips apart. He had an Adam's apple so prominent that Smith felt moved to confide in Shane:

"Looks like a dang baseball had got stuck in his craw!"

The stranger pulled in his horse a few paces off and sat looking down at them curiously. Then abruptly his glance swung to Smith and glowed with the venom of an adder.

"That there lump yer a-lookin' at, mister, is all there is left of the last bloke wot made a narsty remark abaht my afflickshun. I'm some'at tender on the subjeck as yer'll bloody well find out if I 'ear any more aspershuns flung in my direckshun!"

"A fella thin as you are couldn't scare my shadder—let alone me."

On the heels of this defiance there came the crack of a pistol and dust jumped from the adobe wall between Smith's fingers. He jerked his hand away with a startled oath and his eyes grew big and round as he saw the pistol in the horseman's hand and the tiny wisp of smoke curling lazily from its muzzle. The fierce look was still on the stranger's homely countenance as he swung his glance to Shane.

SHANE looked from the newcomer to the gaping Smith and was hard put to repress a chuckle. He did not know which of the two seemed the more villainous looking, Smith or the funny-talking stranger. Smith's jaw abruptly shut with a clack of teeth and he returned the horseman's glowering stare with interest.

"Aw, go roll yore hoop," he sneered.

Shane said, "Nice shootin', pardner. What's your trade when you ain't vacationin'?"

The stranger twirled his gun by the trigger guard as he let his eyes play over Shane. "Hit ain't none of yer bloody business," he said insolently, "but I don't mind tellin' yer I'm a trigger slammer on which yer can smell the brimstone from hell's backlog! An' 'oo might yer be to be arskin' all the questions?"

Shane laughed and said, "Shucks, I'm S. G. Shane—"

"The bloke that 'eller Lume's got 'is knife out for?"

"Well," admitted Shane, "I don't know as Lume's whettin' up his knife for me, but somebody surely is."

"Yer said it!" applauded the scrawny stranger. "'E's 'ad some flyers 'oisted fer yer—I seen 'em. 'E's got 'em plarstered orl over Tortilla Flat! 'One thousan' dollars reward fer the capture, dead or alive, of S. G. Shane, wanted fer the killin' of Marshal Brady!' "

Shane was perturbed at this unwelcome news, but did not let it show upon his face. Fast work, he was thinking grimly. But aloud he said, "Shucks, it looks like Jarson Lume is gettin' right-down reckless with his money. Was you aimin' to collect it, stranger?"

The stranger spat significantly. "Bless me, no! A fine mug I'd be to 'elp 'im out, wot? 'Im that 'ad me pinched an' fined fer runnin' a bit of a crap game out in front of 'is blarsted Square Deal! Blimey! I tell yer straight, mister, if that bloody marshal 'adn't took me rod aw'y I'd 'ave punctured 'is mortal tintype, s'elp me!'

It came to Shane as he studied this curious fellow thoughtfully, that here was a brand for the burning. Always providing of course that Lume had not discovered his whereabouts and was seeking to install this queer fire-eater among Shane's outfit as a spy. But that, to Shane, seemed hardly likely for he felt that had Lume located him he would have dispatched some gunslicks swiftly with orders to put an end to him. And, since Shane had not seen this fellow during his stay in town, it seemed reasonable to suppose the man was, like himself, a stranger among the Philistines.

He said, "But you've got a gun now."

"I sure 'ave!" admitted the horseman most emphatically. "An' I won't be backard abaht usin' it. Nor 'arf."

"Care to take on a job?"

The stranger looked suspicious. "That sounds a bit like work, mister," he opined. "Work's like soap—fer them as likes it. Still—" he appeared to hesitate, then finally added, "if wot yer got in mind could be described as a contemplated meanness ter that Lume jasper, I'm all fer it," and he grinned in a peculiar twisted manner.

"I allow Lume an' me is apt to have a run-in sooner or later," Shane agreed. "Someone is certain sure tryin' to lift my hair, an' I wouldn't be none surprised to learn it was Brother Jarson or Friend Latham. You ride with me an' you'll go places, fella—fast."

"Yus," the stranger nodded. "But there's plyces where a bloke mightn't give a damn ter go. I don't aim ter git wheré I'll be shovin' up the daisies."

"Well, of course, there's that possibility," Shane admitted. "But I think I can promise you plenty of fun before your harp gets handed down. What do they call you, friend?"

"Bless Jones."

"Well, I'm glad to know you," Shane said gravely, shaking hands with the scrawny horseman.

Smith squinted up at him. "Bless? That's a helluva name!"

"Yer wantin' ter make so'thin' out of it?" Jones demanded, glowering.

Smith backed water quickly. "I was jest expressin' a opinion—nothin' pers'nal."

"Better not be!" Jones revealed his buck teeth in a scowl. "'Orace, me ol' man christened me. Hit's a 'andle I ain't never overworked. Wot's *yer* name, pal?"

Smith flushed and looked uncomfortable. He swallowed with apparent difficulty and licked at his lips as though they scorched. He was plainly mortified as he reluctantly admitted faintly, "Albert Percival, but it ain't my fault."

Shane chuckled. Horace and Albert Percival! More ludicrous names for

such a pair of hard-case characters he would have been hard put to imagine.

Smith muttered under his breath and his cheeks flamed darkly.

Jones looked positively murderous as, dropping a hand to gun butt, he snarled, "Wot the bloody 'ell yer laffin' at?"

Shane's laugh deepened. Then, sobering to a wide grin, he remarked, "Parents sure ain't got no sense of decency when it comes to wishin' names on their kids. The kind we got forces a gent to become a leather-slappin' hell-bender in order to keep from gettin' trampled on. I was awarded Shelley Garrimonde Shane—but don't never tell nobody!"

THE others guffawed loudly and the ice was broken. Shane got out a bottle and friendship was cemented.

Jones announced abruptly, "Comp'ny comin'. Bit of dust cuttin' this way fast. Over by that red butte. Yer'll see it in 'arf a sec."

Shane, peering beneath a shading hand, said, "Light down an' rest your saddle, Jones. I'm offerin' you the foreman's bunk. Smith here answers to the call of 'Alibi'."

Presently Shane saw the dust cloud Jones had mentioned. It was speeding nearer fast. "Fella's crazy to be crowdin' a hoss like that in this heat."

"Some blokes ain't got no sense," Jones remarked. "Not 'arf."

"Right," Smith growled, looking covertly at Jones. "Some is born dumb an' others works hard to get that way."

Jones, not catching the look, sniffed. He was holding his glance on the speeding rider ripping up the yellow dust. "That bloke is makin' real lather," he grunted, biting off a ragged chew from a chunk of Star Plug.

Smith eyed the plug and a wistful look crept into his gaze. But Jones put the remainder in his pocket without further ceremony. "Yus—makin' real lather, 'e is. Wonder wot 'e wants?"

"Stick around a spell an' mebbe you'll learn—if yore hoss don't cave in beneath yore rugged weight in the meantime." Smith's tone had an edge of sarcasm, but Jones only sniffed and kept his saddle.

"Some blokes' tongues is allus waggin'," he observed, "but they don't never say nothin' fer a grown man ter listen at."

"Why, it's a kid!" Shane muttered, still eyeing the oncoming rider. "Mebbe some one's chasin' him."

"Naw—we'd 'a' seen their dust if there was."

"Blimey! It's a greaser kid!" Jones muttered after a moment.

A short time later the Mexican youth pulled his horse up on its haunches three feet from the men before the ranch house, showering them with dust and pebbles. His dark eyes sped from one to another of the three, perturbed.

"Señor Shane?"

"Right here," drawled Shane stepping forward.

The youth fumbled in a pocket of his ragged chaps and brought forth a scrap of dirty paper which he extended.

"For Señor Shane," he said and, whirling his horse, was off before a protest could be voiced.

"Yer think I better storp 'im?"

"No, let him go," Shane said, unfolding the paper the youth had given him. "He's just a messenger—" His voice trailed off as he took in the single line of scrawled writing that crossed the paper's center. With frowning brows he read it aloud:

> Lume is sendin' some hell-benders after yore scalp.

There was neither salutation nor signature.

"We better get the hell outa here," Alibi Smith muttered nervously. "If we wait for them hairpins to git here, we might be given jobs pushin' up the daisies!"

"Blimey, yer a odd bloke!" sneered Jones unpleasantly. "Bless me if I

don't believe yer wear yer rubbers w'en it rains!"

"I got a sense of proportion, that's all," Smith said defiantly. "What the devil good'll it do anyone fer us to stay here an' get murdered?"

"Aah! Did yer ever storp ter think yer might do a bit ave murderin' yerself?"

Smith looked uneasy. "I wouldn't want to have to kill a man," he muttered.

Shane looked at him and grinned. "Well, that's a good Christian sentiment," he opined. "But when fellas like this Tortilla Flat crowd won't play accordin' to the rules, an' insist on stackin' the deck—why, then it's time to raise your foot an' scatter their teeth on the sidewalk."

"Wot yer goin' ter do?" Jones asked.

Shane's smile was whimsical. "Why, boys, I'm figurin' to set right here an' greet 'em with the hand of friendship when they come."

"An' if they spit in yer 'and," Jones questioned slyly, "will yer turn the other cheek?"

"Now I'll tell you, Bless. My calculations ain't got that far as yet. But if these fellas get *too* obnoxious, I reckon it might be a good idea if we took 'em down a peg."

"IT'LL never work!" declared Alibi Smith, rubbing his long nose energetically.

"Blimey, but 'e's cheerful as a 'angman's grin!" Jones hooted. "A reg'lar ray of sunshine!"

Shane looked at them and chuckled. "Oh, it might. I allow it's sure worth tryin' anyway." He eyed the nose that Smith was rubbing. It was the fellow's most outstanding feature; long and slender with a bony hump in its middle and an upward twist to its end. "You want to be right careful of that proboscis, Smith. It's the only one like it in seventeen counties."

Jones guffawed. But Smith scowled gloomily; he was touchy about his features. "There yuh go," he growled. "Runnin' down my anatomy instead of concentratin' on the details of that crazy scheme you're set to pull. What kinda flowers yuh want in case they're decent enough to bury yuh?"

"Listen at 'im!" Jones exclaimed. "Hell, we'll live ter tell whoppers ter yer gran'children!"

"Not if I know Jarson Lume, yuh won't," Smith sighed lugubriously. "When it comes to butchers he's the real McCoy an' he can hate worse an' longer than sixty-five Injuns. No kiddin'—you fellas better lay off that fast one."

Jones snorted. "Runnin' a sandy on that blighter will be sweeter'n kissin' the Queen of Sheba! I can just see 'is jaw boggin' down an' 'is eyes a-gogglin' when 'e finds out 'ow we've rooked 'im!"

"An' I can jest see yore mootilated corpses after his gunnies gits after yuh!" mourned Albert Percival Smith with a flip of his long skinny nose.

Six days had passed since the Mexican lad had practically foundered a horse to bring Shane that anonymous warning note. Six days during which no faintest sign of danger had distorted the routine life on the ranch at Keeler's Crossing. Growing restive with the dry monotony of bucolic existence, Sudden Shane had hatched up a plan by which he and Bless Jones aimed to deduct a bit of profit from the heretofore smoothly running business of the infamous Jarson Lume.

Alibi Smith shook a mournful head as Shane and Jones saddled their ponies.

"Cheer up, ol' undertaker," grunted Jones. "We ain't never been planted yet."

Smith rubbed his long nose. "There's allus a first time for everythin'," he sardonically pointed out. He directed a solemn stare at Shane. "Don't yuh reckon it'd be wise to deed this place to me in writin'—case yuh never git back alive?"

But Shane only chuckled, and presently he and Jones rode off.

CHAPTER VIII

A Hard-Case Hombre

IN the scantily furnished office of the Copper King Mine, old Obe Struthers peered grimly at the weather-beaten features of Lefty Hines over the rims of his tortoise-shell glasses. His wrinkled face showed lines of worry; the knuckles of the hand that gripped his desk gleamed whitely in the feeble glow of the flickering candle.

"So Lume is planning to stop the payroll I've got comin' through on tomorrow's stage, is he? The dirty skunk!"

"He'll stop it, too," Hines told him curtly, and spat an amber stream at the brass cuspidor in the corner. "He's out to break you, Obe, jest like he broke Milt Badger an' Ross Clark. He's had his eye on the Copper King ever since we drove that shaft on the sixty-foot level. He knows what we've got down there an' he means to have it. Somebody slipped him a chunk of that ore!"

"But they couldn't! I've had the men searched ev'ry time they went off duty! They haven't—"

"You didn't yank their tongues out, did you? Well, men'll talk, an' someone talked to Lume. I can't tell you how he got that chunk of ore, but I can tell you this—it came from the Copper King, an' it came from that shaft on the sixty-foot level!"

Struthers' face seemed to take on ten years of age. His shoulders drooped, his chin sagged forward on his chest and he stared unseeingly across his littered desk. He roused suddenly with a desperate snarl.

"The damned two-legged polecat! Ain't there nothin' that'll stop him?"

A faint sardonic grin tugged at the corners of Hines' tight mouth and a light of mockery swam in his lidded glance. But he took care that old Obe Struthers did not note these signs of his wolfish amusement.

"It's hell, I reckon," he said unemotionally, "but we got to face the facts. Jarson Lume is runnin' this camp an' what he wants he gets. Seems like it would be better to give in an' sell out at the price he's offerin'—"

"Never!" Obe Struthers gritted, half rising from his chair.

"That's a long time," Hines remarked. "You better reconsider, don't you reckon?"

Obe Struthers did not reply to that, but hunched deeper in his chair. His tired old gaze passed over the littered papers on the desk and sought the gunbelt and holstered weapon depending from a peg above it, cobwebbed and covered with dust. For a fleeting instant there was a brightening flicker in his eyes. Then it spluttered out leaving them dull and inexpressibly weary.

These things did not escape the wary Hines and contempt lay open on his mocking features. A mirthless humor lighted his stare as the harsh crunch of booted feet on the graveled earth outside galvanized the old man to a tense rigidity.

"What's that?" He cocked his shaggy head to one side in an attitude of listening. "Somebody comin'?"

A faint smile crossed the gunfighter's sneering lips. "Sounds like it."

Struthers, rising from his chair, was reaching for his gun when the door opened quietly and Jarson Lume's black-frocked figure entered. He closed the door behind him casually and nodded to the mine owner.

"How's tricks?"

"You know damn well they're rotten," Struthers grunted, sinking back in his seat without touching the holstered gun. "An' you know why they're rotten, too! Lume, you're a polecat!"

Lume chuckled. "No secret about that," he said, taking a cigar from his pocket and lighting it. "I've come over

here to make you a final offer. Ten thousand dollars for the Copper King. You can take it or you can leave it, Struthers—but I'm advisin' you to take it. You ain't got long to live an' you might's well enjoy what time is left."

Struthers seemed about to let himself go in a violent rage; seemed about to give vent to the terrible hate he held toward this man. He half started from his chair again, but sat down heavily when Lume's left arm swept out and brushed the weighted gunbelt from its peg. The thud it made as it struck the floor, somehow drew Struthers' eyes to Hines.

The gunfighter's red-rimmed eyes had shrunk to slits and he stood in a crouch with right hand poised like a talon above his pistol. His head seemed sunk between his squatty shoulders; his lips were twisted in a wanton smile and his left cheek was white from pressure where his oversized chew bulged against it.

Obe Struthers winced as he looked from Hines to the coldly grinning Lume.

"So Hines is in it, too," he sighed.

"Hines," Jarson Lume remarked, "is a man who knows which side his bread is buttered on. You'll do better runnin' with the wolves, Obe." He fingered his tiny mustache. "Virtue may be its own reward, like they say in the copy books, but it takes hard cash to buy good whisky. How about it? My time's valu'ble. You goin' to sell or ain't you?"

Obe Struthers knew when he was licked.

Turning abruptly, Jarson Lume departed and made his way over to Lize Corbin's restaurant.

"YOU git outen here, you dang chicken hawk!" Lize Corbin gritted, reaching down one hand for the sawed-off shotgun which she kept beneath the counter.

"You can leave that scatter gun where it is," sneered Jarson Lume. "I'm not going to bite you. Just drifted over to ask if you'd heard the news."

"What news—*Never mind!* I ain't interested in no news *you* could bring me. Git outen here now 'fore I lose my temper an' blow your middle plumb to glory!"

"Cussed if I don't believe you'd do it, too," Lume murmured in admiration.

"You're dang right I'd do it—an' I sure will if you don't haul your freight!"

"Well," the gambler boss of Tortilla Flat said, making as though to leave, "if you ain't interested in that driftin' gunslick hellion what took up for you against Stone Latham—"

"What?"

"Oh, interested now, eh? I thought Shane's name'd fetch you. Well, you can figure the next time you set eyes on him he'll be where he won't be doin' no more meddlin' with things that don't concern him."

He eyed her over insolently. "I got a tip Shane's been seen over round Youngsburg. I passed the news on to the boys. They saddled up pronto an' hit the trail allowin' they'd be packin' Shane's hide back here before tomorrow mornin' or bust a gut. Ain't nobody left round town but Pedro Abrilla—that is, nobody else but some drunken miners an' a handful of barflies. Nobody's around that'll have any special interest in *you*."

"What you gettin' at?" Lize Corbin lifted her scatter gun and placed it handy on the counter. "Your wolf pack'll never git Sudden Shane—he's a heap too smart for the likes of you! You roll your hoop outen here now or I'll smoke you up!"

"That ain't no way to talk to your—" Lume grinned mockingly—"to the fellow who's goin' to be your husband inside the next hour."

"Husband, hell!" Lize Corbin snapped with unladylike emphasis. "I wouldn't marry you, Jarson Lume, if you was the las' white man on earth! I'd sooner be married to a sheep-

dipped herder than to hitch up with a two-legged skunk like you. Why, you're so dang low a snake's belly would pass clear over the top of your haid!"

A queer smile curled the lips of Jarson Lume. "Still feelin' proddy when it comes to marryin' me, eh?"

"Yeah! It's not me you want to marry. You are plumb anxious to marry the gold mine you think my ol' man found before you bumped him off!" she jeered, her stormy eyes flashing over him contemptuously. "You better clear outen here now before Shane finds out what you're up to. He'd knock you so far it would take a bloodhoun' a week to find you!"

Lume chuckled silently. "Shane ain't goin' to be in no condition to knock anything once the boys get their sights lined on him. He's all washed up. An' so will you be—unless you're willin' to listen to reason. Hell, girl, it ain't every skirt I'd ask to marry me! Get hep to yourself, Lize. Any bit of fluff in town'd jump at the chance to get a man like me."

"Well, here is one bit that ain't figurin' to do no jumpin'!"

Lume's handsome, bloodless face abruptly darkened with rage. "No?" he snarled. "Well, right there's where you're mistaken, girl. Grab 'er, Pete!"

WHIRLING, like some frightened animal, Lize Corbin saw behind her the swarthy grinning face of Pedro Abrilla. Catlike, he had entered through a window in the kitchen and softly stalked upon her while she stood listening to the husky-toned voice of Lume. As Abrilla sprang she reached for the shotgun, but her fingers closed on empty air. Jarson Lume had snatched the weapon even as she reached.

"Call off your wolf," she panted, struggling in Abrilla's bearlike arms.

"You agreein' to marry me?" drawled Lume with a mocking grin.

"No, I ain't!"

"Better treat her a little rougher, Pete," Lume advised. "She'll take a lot of gentlin'."

"You damned coward!" the girl cried bitterly. "You wait'll Shane—"

Lume sneered, "Shane won't be botherin' anyone any more. You better give in. One way or another I'll have you anyway. Whether you like it or not, you're goin' to marry me this afternoon—"

"You won't get no preacher to marry me against my wishes!" Lize panted, kicking at the Mexican's shins.

"Don't count too heavy on that. There's lots of ways of makin' a man do somethin' he don't have no natural inclination for. There's a sky-pilot in the jug right now that I've been holdin' since yesterday for just this purpose. Coupla the boys roped him on the trail to Mormon Flat, an' I had Latham arrest him for disturbin' the public peace. 'Fore I get through with him he'll be glad to do worse things than marry you for the sake of gettin' free."

He grinned as he saw that Abrilla had by now got the girl in hand. She was no longer struggling. She couldn't, for the Mexican held her in a viselike grip that would have spelled a broken limb for her had she fought him longer.

Lume let his insolent glance dwell lecherously upon her. "Pretty as a little red wagon," he complimented. "Even with your hair all mussed an' your shirt half torn from your back you're the best-lookin' hellcat Texas ever spawned!"

She eyed him in sullen defiance, a light in her glance that would have withered a lesser man than Lume. But Jarson Lume was used to women's tantrums and was not easily moved. There was no shame in him and his grinning lips were moist like a hungry wolf's.

"A foretaste of marital—" Lume broke off abruptly as the swinging doors banged inward. A breathless man burst into the place and stood

there gulping while his round excited eyes took in the scene. Lume eyed him ominously, and his right hand slid inside his coat.

The man shrank back. "Don't shoot!" he panted. "I—I ain't buttin' in! Shane's here!"

Lume tensed. "What's that?"

"Some fella—just brung 'im—in! He's claimin' the reward! Says he wants his money quick or he'll turn Shane loose!"

"Where is he?"

"They're both over to the marshal's office. Shane's tied onto his hoss."

"Hang onto the girl," Lume growled and, shoving the messenger out of his way, strode purposefully toward the door.

AS Jarson Lume stepped out into the hot smash of the afternoon sun his right hand went to his black mustache in a caress that was the epitome of triumph. His cold eyes glowed with a savage satisfaction. Somehow, he reasoned, Sudden Shane had eluded the hurrying posse. But the result remained as pleasing, for someone else had caught him. In Jarson Lume this drifter, Shane, had met his match!

Yes, the fruits of victory tasted sweet indeed to Jarson Lume as he strode along through the hock-deep dust on a tangent that would swiftly bring him to the marshal's office. He could see Shane slumped in his saddle, hands tied behind him, ankles lashed beneath his horse's belly, his shoulders sagging with the weariness of resignation. The mouth of Jarson Lume quirked maliciously as his glance took in the sight.

Even now Jarson Lume had commenced to gloat. Within his warped, malignant mind were visions of strange and cruel tortures which he proposed to swiftly administer to this man who had defied him, who had mocked him and with the bitter iron of fear made raw his soul. In ecstatic fancy he could hear Shane's sobbing cries and pleas for mercy. What had Shane against him to have treated him thus? Who was this drifting gunslick? His agile mind swung down his past and found a number of disturbing possibilities. His lust for Shane's blood mounted.

The marshal's office at Tortilla Flat was an adobe addition to the peeled log building of the stage company. On a day like this it was an oven which even the flies shied away from. Just inside the door, astraddle a chair, sat a slim wiry man whose abruptly grinning lips revealed a double row of bulging buck teeth.

Lume had made the acquaintance of this hombre at an earlier date and most emphatically did not like him. Sight of him now acted as a cold douche upon the rosy pictures in Lume's mind; they rocked, shivered and blacked out before a sudden premonition. What was this fellow doing here?

Passing the fettered Shane with hardly a glance, Lume strode into the marshal's office and confronted the skinny outlander grimly. "Wasn't you told to get outa Tortilla Flat an' stay out?" he demanded.

"I sh'd say so," Bless Jones grinned. "But yer see I 'adn't any money an' figgered I'd ort ter get a stake tergether before I left. I seen one of yer reward posters describin' this hardcase hombre, Shane. Says I ter me, ' 'Orace, 'ere's yer chance ter git a stake without much work, an' yer bloody well know it!' So I went out an' took 'im an' 'ere 'e is. W'ere's my money?"

Jarson Lume scowled at the angular speaker suspiciously. To his mind there was something altogether too glib about this fellow's tale. Yet he could not put his finger to anything especial.

"A pretty slick customer," he sneered.

"Blimey, yer said it—slick as they come!"

Lume fingered his tiny mustache thoughtfully. The man must be exceptionally handy with his pistol to effect the single-handed capture of this wildcat, Shane.

"Where'd you find Shane?"

"At 'is ranch. Does that make any diff'rence?"

"Well, no—but—"

"Never mind the buts. Wot I want is my money an' yer bloody well know it! Pay up or shut up!"

LUME'S hand slid inside his coat as a dark wave of angry color flooded his cheeks. He was not accustomed to being spoken to in such a manner and resented it. This hardcase drifter was entirely too free with his chin music. But he did not draw the gun his fingers sought. His reaching hand had hardly touched its handle when he found himself staring into the gaping orifice of a pistol conjured by Jones from the very air, apparently.

"Take it easy, mister, unless yer yearnin' fer a 'arp an' 'alo!"

"I was getting you the money—" Jarson Lume began when Jones' strident laugh cut him off.

"Yus, I'll bet yer was!" Jones said, and prodded him in the stomach with his pistol. "Get it now, an' don't get nothin' else less'n yer wantin' me ter knock a few stars in yer crown."

Lume produced his wallet and, under the watchful eye of his villainous-looking visitor, proceeded to count out a thousand dollars. Jones carefully stowed the money into the patched pocket of his shirt, while his right hand continued to prod Lume suggestively with the gun.

"Much obliged," he grinned. "I can see yer a real gent which knows the ol' saw about the laborer bein' worthy of 'is 'ire." Still keeping his gun on Lume, he backed away toward the door. But he stopped short and tensed when a shot rang out from somewhere down the street, dry and diminutive in the vast immensity of the stifling afternoon.

"Wot's that?"

Lume too was scowling. "I don't know." His eyes mirrored a distinctly worried light which did not escape the wary orbs of Jones. "Untie Shane's feet and bring him in here. We'll put him in a cell."

Jones said, "Mebbe yer'd better put that gun yer totin' on the desk over there w'ere it won't be temptin' yer. An' be careful, Jarson, 'cause yer bloody well know I'd as lief shoot yer as look at yer."

After the gambler had deposited his weapon as bidden on the desk, he stared impatiently at Jones. "Well, get on about untyin' him. What are you waitin' for?"

Jones grinned slyly. "If there's any untyin' ter be done, yer the one that's goin' ter do it." And he motioned with his gun significantly.

Lume's cold face was immobile as he strode past Jones and out the door. But he could not keep the angry flame of vexation from his cheeks.

"Careful, now," Jones admonished with widening grin. "'E might kick yer in the chin. 'E's a vengeful hombre an' uncommon vicious in 'is 'abits."

Lume snorted and, bending, untied the buckskin thongs that lashed the prisoner's ankles beneath his horse's belly. But hardly had he done so when Shane's spurred heels smacked hard against the animal's ribs.

Lume jumped backward hurriedly in startled alarm as the horse rose to its hind legs snorting. The next instant its forehoofs came down smashingly and it was off in a cloud of dust that enveloped like a fog Jarson Lume's black-coated form. The gambler's blazing eyes swung swiftly to Jones. That versatile individual was gaping after Shane's diminishing dust-screened figure with open mouth and bulging eyes.

Lume swore roundly. As though released from a spell by the gambler's abuse, Jones' drooping gun came up in

a bursting arc of livid flame. The roaring reverberations smashed against the houses fringing the street on either side, but strangely Shane rode on with unabated speed—and that, despite the fact that his hands were lashed behind him.

scorched the fetid air with mighty oaths.

A short distance out of town, screened from sight by a bend in the upward-climbing trail, Shane lounged in the saddle and waited for the pursuing Jones. When Jones reined his

"Blimey," ejaculated Jones, registering chagrin, " 'e's got away!"

Lume, fists clenched, moved toward him ominously, his usually inscrutable face a mask of fury, his dark eyes gleaming balefully.

But, as though not noticing the gambler's advance, Jones sprang hurriedly to his saddle. With swinging quirt and driving spurs Jones pounded after the vanishing Shane while Lume

horse in beside him, Shane chuckled. "I'm allowin' that worked just like a charm."

Jones' lips curled derisively. "Blimey, it was like takin' candy from a kid! Lume swelled up like a poisoned pup w'en 'e seen yer dustin' outa town. Lume! 'E's mad as a drunk squaw!"

"An' just as dangerous, I reckon," Shane said thoughtfully. Then he laughed. "Our little exploit ain't goin'

to boost his stock a heap, I expect. He'll have to get us now to save his face."

"Won't 'e though?" Jones chuckled delightedly. "I wonder if 'e's 'eard the old one 'bout them as sups with the devil needin' long spoons?" Then, sobering, he added, "But just the same, between you, an' the gatepost, all that saved our bloody bacon was that stunt of yers, sendin' in that kid with that tale about yer bein' seen at Youngsburg. If that 'adn't pulled all 'is butcher-birds outa town, we'd be buzzard bait this minute!"

Shane nodded. "We better be rockin' along. You got that money?"

"'Ave I?" Jones displayed a toothy grin. "An' 'ow!"

CHAPTER IX

Wolves on the Prowl

BACK in Tortilla Flat Jarson Lume was raging. Outwardly he was coldly saturnine, but inside his frozen-faced exterior he was an erupting volcano of destructive fury. He needed something to act as a safety valve to his turbulent emotions, and he had not long to seek to find the very thing he needed in the person of Pedro Abrilla, he who had been left to guard Lize Corbin.

When the boss of Tortilla Flat came striding savagely inside the Come-An'-Get-It, he was all primed to force its owner to go through a marriage ceremony with him. He would show this bedeviling baggage who was boss in short order, he had told himself. He'd had enough of her tantrums and was all fed up. She would marry him before the sun went down or he would break her damned neck!

But when he got inside Lize Corbin's place his eyes sprang wide. He saw no sign of the girl. But Pedro Abrilla was supporting himself against the counter with a shaking left hand, while his equally shaking right was clamped against his thigh as though to stop the bright red blood that was seeping steadily between his fingers. There was no gun in the holster on his belt; there was no weapon on the floor, either, other than Lize Corbin's discarded scatter gun.

"Well, what's happened here?" asked Lume quietly, a grim note in his husky voice. "Where's the girl? How did you get shot? Why," he growled, with a touch of impatience that revealed a hint of the lashing bitterness and hatred that was gnawing away his habitual complacency, "don't you say something? Speak, by hell, or I'll shut you up for keeps!"

The Mexican lifted a grayish face that was filled with pain. What he read in Lume's blazing eyes drove him back against the counter, a look of doglike pleading in his fearful glance.

"Señor! I could not help eet! Thees hellcat snatch my peestol an' queek like a flash she fire! *Madre de Dios!* She ees one devil!"

Three swift steps brought Jarson Lume to a scowling stop before his wounded gunman. In a brutal arc his right clenched hand slashed forward and stopped with a sodden thud against Abrilla's jaw. The luckless Mexican was flung off his feet as though struck by a flying beam. He lay where he fell, sprawled limply on his side with glazing eyes.

Jarson Lume dusted his knuckles and, with a final scowling glance about the place, shoved through the swinging doors and out into the dusty street.

Six hours later, with his back to the fireplace in his private office, he faced his men. They were a dusty, sullen-faced lot after their fruitless trip to distant Youngsburg, chasing an elusive quarry who had never been there. He met their glowering looks with a stare that was hard as flint.

His voice was strongly alkaline. "I'm telling you for the last time that this damned leather-slappin' hellion

has got to be rubbed out. I don't care how it's done, but I want it done quick. Each time I've sent a bunch against him he's outwitted 'em. What has happened to Kettle-Belly Dunn and Tularosa and the men who went with them, I don't know. I can't get a line on them. But I do know this—there hasn't a one of them turned up in this camp since!

"Something has got to be done sudden. I'll pay any two men of you fifteen hundred dollars apiece if this Shane disappears permanent inside the next twenty-four hours." His cold glance surveyed them grimly. "I'm askin' for volunteers."

No one spoke, none stepped forward or moved at all, in fact. The silence became a concrete thing through which men's breathing rasped uncomfortably. It grew long-drawn to the point of strangulation. Then Stone Latham's voice cut across it insolently:

"Why don't you take on the chore yoreself an' save yore damned dinero?"

The air seemed to tighten up and chill. Yet no expression relieved the pale immobility of Jarson Lume's bloodless countenance. Neither by sniff nor scowl did he betray even a taint of thought or feeling. His instincts were locked behind the angles of his high-boned cheeks, behind the opaque hardness of his eyes and the straight-lipped line of his mouth.

HE kept his glance on Latham fixedly, immovably, until Latham shifted his weight and sneered. And even then he held it there until the silence threatened once more to become insupportable.

Then he said harshly: "Since no one's volunteerin' for this chore I'm givin' it to Stone Latham and Lefty Hines. Twenty-four hours, I said. Remember. If the job ain't done inside that time, you'll not get one damned penny. But you'll do the job just the same—or you'll answer to me."

No brag or bluster marked his tone, but the ominous threat his words contained was felt by all. Jarson Lume was out for blood!

Through the stillness as Jarson Lume's voice trailed off, came the clattering thump of boot heels drumming out an approach. Lume's opaque eyes wheeled as the sounds came to a stop outside the door. Hard knuckles, beating roughly on its panels, awoke the echoes.

Jarson Lume growled softly, "Come in," and his hand slid inside his coat.

The door opened hesitantly and a little man came sidling in with a crablike motion and stood blinking his close-set beady eyes in the yellow glow of the lamps. He ducked his head ingratiatingly the while his wary glance regarded the scowling men.

"Well, gents," he whined, "here I am."

Bronc Walders guffawed. "As if anybody gives a damn!"

Lefty Hines heaved a grunt and bit another chew from his plug of tobacco.

Stone Latham said nothing, nor did he move in any way. He kept his eyes on Lume and his Indian cheeks were dark with resentment.

Lume said curtly, "Shut that door." And when the door was shut, he went on: "Now we'll have your story—an' it better be good. Why ain't you with Kettle Belly an' Tularosa?"

"Kettle-Belly's dead," whined Wimper, uneasily. "Tularosa killed 'im."

"What's that?" Lume snapped. "If you're lyin', Wimper, I'll—"

"I ain't lyin', boss. You know I wouldn't lie to you. What I said is the truth, so help me—"

"What the hell do you know about the truth?" Bronc Walders jeered.

Wimper paled and shrank back against the door as though wishing it were open. "It's truth, I'm tellin' you," he muttered desperately, well knowing the temper of these men. "The truth, so help me! Tularosa got big

ideas—figured he'd break with you an' lead them *paisanos* in raids on his own an' hang onto what loot he took. Kettle-Belly mustn't of agreed with 'im, 'cause all of a sudden Tularosa pulled his knife an' let poor Kettle hev it to the hilt!"

"When'd this happen?" Lume scowled viciously.

"Same night we left here."

"Then where the hell you been ever since?" Bronc Walders snarled.

"I been with Tularosa. I couldn't git away. We been raidin' over round Globe. Yesterday mornin' he got the big idea there might be loot at the ol' ranch on Keeler's Crossin'. Figgered mebbe this Shane had that money—"

"I thought he'd spent that dinero he won here buyin' up the ranch," Lume interjected suspiciously.

"I dunno nothin' 'bout that," Wimper muttered. "I on'y know what he told the men. We rushed the place las' night. There was only one cuss there, a ugly-lookin' jasper which Tularosa tortured in hopes he'd tell where Shane kep' his money. We left him down the pass a ways after we'd burned the buildin's."

"You mean to say that double-crossin' greaser burned that spread?" Stone Latham growled, roused at last from his silence by this angering news. "That's the place we hold the cattle while we're lettin' the brands heal over!"

"Sure, I know. Tularosa said that bein's we wasn't with Lume's crowd any more it wasn't doin' us no good an' we better burn it so's to call a halt to your brand-switchin' ac—"

Lume cut him short with a ripped-out oath. "He *what!*"

"He said we better burn the ranch at Keeler's Crossin' 'cause it was the most important one you had, an' that if we gutted it right it would stop yore boys from handlin' any more cattle till the buildin's an' c'rrals could be built up ag'in. Meantime, he proposed to grab that Bottle-A herd bein' held on Sunrise Mesa an' gut yore market. He figgers he can break you—"

Jarson Lume swore luridly through clenched teeth. There was a bloated look to his taut cheeks that was poisonous as he described in ghastly detail what he proposed to do with Tularosa when next their trails should cross.

When he stopped for lack of breath, Wimper said with a horrible smirk: "That won't be noways necessary, boss. I stopped his clock last night. Shoved my Bowie between his ribs, I did, an' cut my stick before them damn *paisanos* found out what was up!"

CHAPTER X

MEX TREACHERY

SUDDEN SHANE, jogging along the winding trail that would take them to Keeler's Crossing, paid no further attention to his strange companion for some time. His thoughts persisted in dwelling upon the incomprehensible Lize Corbin. Not alone her clothes, but her very personality was different from that of other women he had known.

She was no wan, pale flower misplaced by mocking circumstance in this roaring mountain camp. She belonged here, yet there was something visibly wholesome about her that set her off from the others of her sex. Tomboyish, a creature of strong reactions, there was none the less something about her unutterably feminine and magnetic. She contemplated life with eyes that, though rebellious, were unafraid.

Shane lashed himself with opprobrium; he savagely resented her ability to dominate his thoughts. He cursed the weak-kneed instance when first he had come to her defense. It caused him to become involved with Stone Latham and then with Lume, burdening himself with this succes-

sion of gunfights and dodgings that had followed in its wake.

He had come here for a purpose, and that purpose had nothing whatever to do with Lize Corbin. But instead of accomplishing his original design, all his time thus far had been occupied with turbulence occasioned by his stand with regard to this redheaded tomboy!

Hour after hour they rode northeast in silence. Higher and ever higher they climbed until at last they could look down upon the vast tumbled expanse of chaos that was Superstition Mountains. Great jagged divides, spiny hogbacks, desolate plateaus and mesas, long serpentine ridges—some sinister with dark masses of towering timber, others harsh and bleak in their ugly nakedness—lay spread about them like the toys of some weary giant.

They could see Haystack Butte and Dutch Woman Butte, Methodist Mountain and Aztec Peak, their westermost reaches aglow like molten gold. Behind them Tortilla Mountain, Weaver's Needle and portions of the Apache Trail lay black and stark against the sun's last smile. To the southward Iron Mountain, Black Point and lesser crests rose in shimmering blues and lavenders, while ahead Granite Mountain, Nonesuch Rocks, Klondyke Mountain and the Apache Peaks seemed to frown upon their advance in sullen hate.

And now they were dipping down into the rising blackness of the night that hid all things in a swirling gloom. More slowly now than ever they went, each forward step a peril, a chance of falling untold feet to crash and rot on the unseen rocks below. It finally became so dark they dared not trust their ponies longer on this treacherous trail they followed, and they camped until the coming of the dawn.

In the first fierce light of the rising sun they resumed their way again, its dancing shafts throwing their elongated shadows before them and warming the frozen air.

They got their first view of Keeler's Crossing around seven-thirty, while still some distance off, and the sight dropped Jones' jaw.

"Albut's gorn!" he croaked.

Shane lips pressed tight and grim. Alibi Albert Percival Smith was indeed gone, he saw. And gone was more, besides. Gone were the buildings of his ranch, reduced to a few charred posts and smoldering ashes!

The sun struck down on Keeler's Crossing like a brassy hammer, blistering the sand and dry-curled grass, heating the gritty wind until its breath was like the draft from a furnace. The sky shimmered like a sheet of tin.

Bless Jones, with one leg crooked about the saddle horn, regarded Shane gloomily. "Ain't this 'ell?" he sympathized. "Wot yer goin' ter do?" His glance played somberly across the charred remnants of the buildings they had spent two weeks repairing. "Skunks wot done this ort to be 'amstrung, by cripes!"

Shane grinned ruefully. "I been expectin' somethin' like this," he said. "I reckon it was too much to hope Lume wouldn't be payin' me back for buyin' this spread with money I took out of his Square Deal. He hasn't got no sense of humor."

"Yer bloody well know 'e ain't! Wot yer reckon they done with Albut?"

Shane's gray eyes clouded. He rasped his chin thoughtfully. "I wish I knew. I'm afraid—"

"Look!" Jones pointed excitedly up the trail leading down from the bluffs. "We're goin' ter 'ave comp'ny."

TRUE enough; down the rocky trail a rider was coming slowly, carefully, lest a misstep spell disaster. The rider's clothes were worn and dusty and heavily seamed with wrinkles; the shirt many-hued with patches. The rider was lithe and willowy, sure and graceful in the canted saddle, face concealed—save for a rounded chin—by the down-turned brim of a shabby hat.

Shane's eyes, as he watched this rider's progress, were narrowed thoughtfully. There was something familiar about the—

His thoughts were broken at this point by Bless Jones' startled voice: "Bless me! Hit's a gal!"

Shane swore beneath his breath as he recognized Lize Corbin, for she it was. And from Shane's viewpoint she could not have come at a more inopportune time. Right now a trip to Tortilla Flat was in order; a visit to even the score with Lume for the burning of these buildings. It was a thing he did not care to put off, for he was anxious to get in touch with Struthers and find out in what manner he could be of service to his dead brother's former pardner.

So it was he eyed the approaching girl with grumpy disfavor, though deep within him a voice cried out that he was glad to have her here. But he stifled its cry with savagery; he could not be burdened with a girl—he *would* not.

"Shane, you dang lunkhaid, h'are you?" She flashed him an eager smile, just as though her parting from Tortilla Flat had not been filled with turbulence and frought with dire possibilities of shame.

She drew up nearby, sat lounging in her saddle while she regarded him expectantly. "Well," she managed, as the silence lengthened, "even if you ain't glad to see me, you might pretend you are. You look like I might hev poison ivy on me, or somethin'."

"Shucks, ma'am," Shane drawled, removing his hat—a gesture which was imitated by the watchful Jones. "I reckon I'm plumb glad to see you, but—"

Her eyes flashed round, taking in the scattered heaps of ashes and the smoking, blackened posts. "This the spread you bought?" And at his nod, she added: "Jarson's one fast worker, ain't he?"

Her glance swung back and searched his face. "But what?" Her eyes were on his squarely.

"But—" Shane shifted uncomfortably, finding his saddle unusually hard. "But—well, you see, ma'am, right now I got a heap to do an'—" he floundered hopelessly beneath her level regard, his sun-darkened cheeks showing his embarrassment. "I—I—"

Her head went up, like that of a spirited pony. Scorn flashed from the stormy eyes that stabbed his conscience. Her mouth became a white and twisted line.

"I can see you don't want me here.

Well, you needn't to worry—I'll keep away!" And, with a choked little sob, she whirled her horse and roweled across the muddy creek and into the trail to Globe.

"Here—wait!" Shane called, but without avail.

"Blimey!" Jones said. "Yer done it now!"

WHEN Lize Corbin raced away from Keeler's Crossing, she was shaking with a fury she had never known before. She drove her horse with quirt and spur, caring not where she went so long as it was away. She rode with a red fog before her eyes and a terrible ringing in her ears. Her heart beat against her breast with a tumult that seemed certain to loose it from her body and her breathing came in panting sobs.

Miles sped beneath pony's hoofs like paces, yet still she urged him on. The drive of the whistling wind, the fierce clattering pound of hoofs and headlong careening movement blent well with the storm within her and in some small measure seemed to ease her tortured spirit.

That Shane, of all men, should have treated her thus! Had he driven a knife in her heart and twisted, he could not have hurt her more. What a horrible thing to find oneself madly in love with a man who valued one's regard so lightly! With a man who cared no whit whether one were near or miles away!

She lashed her spirit raw with bitter, endless thoughts of Shane until at last exhausted, her passion consumed in its own white flame, she brought her lathered pony to a halt.

She cast a heedful glance about. Rimrock seemed to hem her in from all directions save ahead. Ahead the trail rose twisting through a veritable maze of boulders; boulders small, toadlike and ugly; boulders towering tall and mighty; reddish boulders squatted precariously and sinister in the sand and clacking rattle-weed.

This looked like the trail to Globe, she thought, and shuddered to think she'd ridden its tortuous path in such abandon. Her red lips quivered and tears fell unchecked upon her cheeks.

But presently her sobbing ceased. "Bawlin' like a spoiled brat!" she upbraided herself. "Lize Corbin, you're a gosh-blamed fool!"

She smiled a little at that, a wan pathetic twisting of the lips. "Sure is lucky none of them lunkhaids back at the Flat is watchin' me now. I reckon they'd git a big kick outa seein' Dry-Camp Corbin's tomboy snifflin'." She shook her head disgustedly. "I must be gittin' soft!"

She peered beneath a shading hand at the trail ahead. After all, it did not greatly matter where she went as long as never again her eyes should fall on Shane, or Lume, or Latham. She would never return to Tortilla Flat where Lume would keep on annoying her; she must hide herself some place beyond his reach!

With the thought she straightened bravely in the saddle; with her knees she urged her tired pony on. Perhaps she dared not linger in Globe, but Globe would do for now. It must.

She rode with shoulders drooped dejectedly. What was the use of running away? Lume would run her down and bring her back; she knew it. There was no escaping him. She recalled that others had tried before. And, anyway, what did it matter? Nothing seemed to matter now.

THE stopping of her pony roused her from the gloomy, forlorn mutations of her thoughts. She looked up to find the trail a narrow ribbon between two towering walls of greenish, frowning rock. A horseman blocked her path, sat lounging comfortably with one knee crooked about his silvered saddle horn. A *cigarro* depended limply from his gloating lips, its upward-spiraling s m o k e diffusing against the braided brim of his huge

chin-strapped sombrero. There was a light in his squinting eyes she did not like.

He was a big, huge mountain of a man, she saw. Sleek and swarthy, with black bushy brows overhanging piercing dark eyes that held just now a feline glitter as he found her glance upon him. His shirt was silk and lavender, there were flowers embroidered on the waistcoat that partly covered it, and about his middle was tied a bright red sash. His wine-colored velvet trousers had slashed bottoms, the seams alive with gleaming silver. White teeth abruptly flashed in the burnished copper of his face.

"Buenos dias, señorita," he offered languidly, and doffed his huge sombrero with a calculated flourish.

"What do you want?"

"Ah, but did I say that I weeshed any theeng?"

"Then turn your horse an' let me pass." There was no compromise in Lize Corbin's level tone. She was badly scared by the things to be read in his gloating eyes, but she would not let him know.

"The day ees too warm for such hurry, señorita. Your *caballo,* he needs the rest. I myself, Manuel Tularosa, shall find eet plaisant to beguile your tedious hours."

"Move pronto, hombre, or I'll let you hev it!" Lize Corbin's whip rose threateningly. She knew that name and quailed within, for tales of Tularosa and his way with women had traveled far. "Move, I say!"

Tularosa's grin was mocking. "My!" he said.

She swung her quirt and he took it on his arm. Before she could pull it back, with a swift jerk he snatched it from her, wrenching her wrist painfully in the act.

"Tularosa shall pull your fangs, leetle hellcat," he warned, throwing the whip behind him.

She shrank from his leering face and made to whirl her horse. But he was too swift for her. Like a snake, his arm shot out and grasped her pony's reins.

"Not so fas', my dove," he taunted, slipping from his saddle sinuously.

The next she knew she was in his arms, struggling desperately but ineffectually. There was a great roaring in her ears, a blackness before her eyes. But she could feel his heavy breathing on her face, and she could feel his supple muscles contracting as he crushed her to him with one great arm.

How long this horror continued she could not tell, but suddenly she almost swooned for joy when a cold, familiar drawl said:

"Hist 'em, polecat!"

Tularosa's crushing arm fell loose and she staggered back to see Shane sitting his horse six feet away, his features stiff as some mask chopped out of wood.

Tularosa crouched like some great puma, glaring at the sudden apparition through bloodshot, narrowed eyes. His mouth was twisted in an ugly sneer and a muscle jerked spasmodically in his left cheek.

Shane swung lithely from the saddle. Lize watched him with cheeks that were deathly white, her former anger forgotten in the thralling interest of the moment. His personality reached strongly across the stillness, pulling at her heartstrings.

She watched him swing forward a pace or two, his catlike step hinting at a smooth coordination of mind and muscle that very shortly might prove deadly. She had a three-quarters view of his countenance. It was hard and colorless and taut; only his eyes seemed alive. They were heated with a smoldering, wanton flame.

She did not see his lips move but the cold, soft drawl of his words brought her a thrill of involuntary admiration.

"Mister, I reckon you thought this was your opportunity. I allow you was figurin' to make a little hay while the

sun was shinin', so to speak. I'm sort of wonderin' if you are still inclined thataway?"

Tularosa sneered, white teeth flashing wolflike in his copper face. His right arm stiffened perceptibly, bent above his holstered gun, his fingers spread in a clawlike droop. Lize could see the malignant hate and menace that glowered from his dark, deep-socketed eyes.

"Mister, I'm allowin' I'm goin' to kill you," Shane said harshly. And now to Lize the full intensity of his awful rage became apparent. There was an inexorable compression to his straight thin-lipped mouth that told of deadly purpose; his blazing eyes held smoking fury.

"Draw, you polecat—draw!"

For an instant there was entire silence in the canyon. Then thunderous echoes split it wide as Tularosa's hand swooped down and up. She could hear the whine of his hurried lead. Then Shane shot coldly from the hip—once. Dust jumped from Tularosa's vest. She saw a cold grin cross Shane's face as the Mexican clutched at his chest and, staggering, crumpled backward in the dust.

CHAPTER XI

Two Smart Hairpins

SHANE looked at Lize and tried to say something, but no words would come. He wanted to put his arms round her and apologize for his lack of enthusiasm when she had come to him at Keeler's Crossing. Instead, he sheathed his gun and built a smoke with slightly trembling hands. When he had it going and could no longer find an excuse in the business of its manufacture, he said gravely:

"I reckon we better be ridin', ma'am."

Then he looked at her again. "Good Lord, Lize!" he blurted, and was beside her in an instant, and she was clinging to him, her wet face hid against his chest while relieving sobs shook her slender body. . . . . Even after they had mounted, and he had settled in his saddle, Shane's blood still throbbed to her kisses. Hungrily his shining eyes fed on the soft pale oval of her face, on her fiery hair and scarlet lips, and on the new, shy wonder in her eyes. They rode in silence for a time while Shane strove mightily to bring some sort of coherent order out of the turmoil in his mind.

At last succeeding, he fell to meditating upon the predicament into which his new-found emotion for this girl was placing him. Obe Struthers had written his brother Jeff for help. Shane had taken up the burden out of reverence to Jeff's memory. But, so far, he had not managed even to talk with Struthers, though already he had been in Struthers' neighborhood for several weeks. But how was he to go running risks for Struthers without a place to leave the girl? And he had no place. Even the doubtful security of the Keeler's Crossing ranch was no longer available!

He frowned a little in his intentness to find a solution.

Lize, with flushed cheeks and a touch of pride in her lifted chin, chose that moment to look at him. A little of the fire went out of her eyes at sight of his frown and she watched him anxiously.

But Shane, all unaware, continued wrestling with his problem, and his frown grew deeper and darker.

He could leave her, he was thinking, with Bless Jones. But where could he leave Bless Jones? The only answer seemed to be for the three of them to seek Obe Struthers out and if there was work for Shane to do, then let Struthers himself provide a safe retreat for Lize until Shane's work was finished.

That settled with himself, Shane relaxed a little and gave his thoughts to

this ranch that he had purchased with money wrung from Lume's Square Deal. Who had burned his buildings? Lume? Or some of Lume's cohorts? But if so, why? And why had they thought fit to take Alibi Smith with them, unless they planned to use him for a hostage? And then, a hostage for what? Ransom? It seemed unlikely, at best.

HIS revolving thoughts turned to the burly Mexican he had bested. He felt no regret for killing that brute. Indeed, he felt a kind of savage satisfaction. Who had the fellow been? With slight curiosity he asked, more for the sake of making conversation than for any other reason:

"That hombre—who was he? Would you be knowin', ma'am?"

A look of loathing crossed the girl's flushed face. "Tularosa," she answered with repugnance. "A leader of hoss thieves, cattle rustlers, and cutthroats. I think he was connected with Jarson Lume." She regarded him curiously as he frowned. "Why?"

"I'm sort of tryin' to connect him up with things. Any of that tough bunch in town been botherin' you again?"

She hesitated and the flush deepened perceptibly in her cheeks. She caught the narrowing of his eyes and said, "Jarson was figurin' to marry me, yesterday. He—"

She broke off with a subtly pleasant tingling as she saw his face grow dark.

Shane snapped, "The orn'ry pup! I reckon he needs a talkin' to. An' I'm allowin' he's due to get one. Wanted to marry you, did he? When was this?"

"Yesterday afternoon. He thinks Dry Camp passed on to me the location of his mine. Seems he'd given up his schemes for gettin' me to talk. I reckon he figured he'd marry me so's if the mine ever turned up he'd be in a position to grab it. But I sloped.

"He was all set an' sendin' for the preacher when some fella came bulgin' in a-yowlin' that some other gent had ridden with you a pris'ner an' was shoutin' for his money. Lume must be right anxious to collect your scalp, I reckon, 'cause he went bangin' out the door like the devil beatin' tan bark! I sure was scared for a minute, but I knowed you'd make the riffle so I cut my stick an' here I am."

"I reckon Jarson Lume," Shane growled, "would eat off the same plate with a snake."

Her blue eyes twinkled fleetingly. "He's a pow'ful orn'ry man." Resentment obscured the twinkle the next moment and she added huskily, "There's others jest as bad."

"I reckon you're thinkin' of Stone Latham, ma'am. An' I'm allowin' he's in need of gentlin', too. I'm figurin'—" he broke off, struck by the peculiar expression in her eyes. "Why, what's the matter, Lize?" His voice was anxions.

"Nothing!" She managed a shaky laugh, and said lamely: "I was jest thinkin'." But she did not confide what her thoughts had been about. Instead she changed the subject. "Who was that puncher I seen you with at Keeler's Crossin'?"

"Name's Bless Jones. Horace, his father called him, but he allows he ain't right partial to that handle." His lips quirked as at some humorous memory. "Tells me he come from England. He's folks over there, I reckon. Said his father was the earl of somethin' or other—Limehouse, I believe. Anyhow, he's some fast on the trigger. I hired him an' another gent to work my spread. I reckon since last night what I need most is carpenters," he grinned ruefully. . . .

When Shane returned to Keeler's Crossing, Jones exhibited no surprise at seeing the girl accompanying him. After Lize Corbin had turned in between her blankets, both men sat smoking beside the campfire.

"Tomorrow," Shane said, "we're headin' for Tortilla Flat. I got to find

a fella named Struthers who owns a mine."

"What you figgerin' ter do with the calico?" ventured Jones, jerking his thumb toward where Lize lay. "Goin' ter take 'er along?"

"Have to," Shane admitted. "No place here to leave her. I'm goin' to put it up to Struthers to find a place for her till I get through with a few chores I got mapped out."

"If them chores 'as got anything ter do with that bloke, Lume, I'd admire ter 'ave a part in 'em," he growled. "I owe that bloke a couple."

Shane grinned. "I'm allowin' that Jarson Lume will figure in them some prominent. I expect he's been takin' all the profit out of Struthers' mine an' Struthers is aimin' to have me see what can be done. We'll have to keep our eyes skinned when we get to town. Some of Lume's hired polecats'll prob'ly have their guns oiled up for us."

"Don't yer know it!" Bless Jones grinned.

"I wish," Shane said soberly, "I knew who sent us that warnin' the other day. I'd hate mighty much to find I'd perforated him by mistake, along with Lume an' the rest of them renegades."

He sighed. "Well, let's turn in so's we can get an early start."

THE next morning Shane and Jones and Lize Corbin rode in leisurely silence toward distant Tortilla Flat. Shane had intended going to the Flat three days ago, as he had confided to Jones that night beside the campfire. But one thing and another had cropped up to change his mind and cause him to postpone the trip. One of these things was the presence of Lize Corbin.

Each passing hour he felt more strongly drawn to the girl. Why? He could not have told. He found something strangely alluring in the poise of her flaming head and in certain of her mannerisms. He loved the expressive Latin way in which she shrugged her shapely shoulders. He counted the time well spent when he watched the sunlight glinting through the copper of her hair, and he took a personal pleasure in observing the varying shades of blue that flashed from her level eyes. He sighed, and squinted out across the country spread about them.

The surface of this land was slashed and broken by the deep purple gashes of ravines and gullies and canyons which seemed to alternate in some crazy, incomprehensible manner with timbered ridges, long shaley hogbacks and flat-topped buttes and mesas that already lay shimmering in distorting strata of heat. This writing haze traced distant mountains in dim blue etchings across the buckling skylines and even made a few more favored ones appear deceptively near.

As the morning advanced the hot smash of the brassy sun beat down upon the thirsty earth with increased venom. The overheated air grew stifling; filled with tiny dust particles that irritated dry throats and nostrils as a red rag does a bull and reddened the rims of smarting eyes.

Then suddenly Bless Jones pulled rein where he rode in the lead. He sat motionless in the saddle scanning dead ahead from beneath a shading hand. When Shane and the girl had joined him, he growled. "Wot yer make of that? Looks like dust ter me—mebbe cattle, or mebbe 'orses."

Shane, following the direction indexed by Jones' outthrust pointing hand, saw a boulder-rimmed ugly gash leading into a valley some seven or eight miles off. Above the gash drifted a lazy ephemeral cloud which he knew for dust.

"You're right, Bless," he admitted. "That *is* dust. Somebody's shovin' cattle into the valley, looks like. Now I'm wonderin' why they'd be wantin' to do that? I'd say that valley wouldn't graze more'n three scrawny critters for half a day."

"Yer bloody well knews it," Jones affirmed.

"Rustlers!" Lize Corbin said. "Some of Jarson Lume's long-loopers. I'm bettin' you bedded down on one of Jarson's relay spreads!"

"Relay spreads?" Shane looked puzzled. "What you mean, ma'am?" I didn't know Lume was in the cattle business."

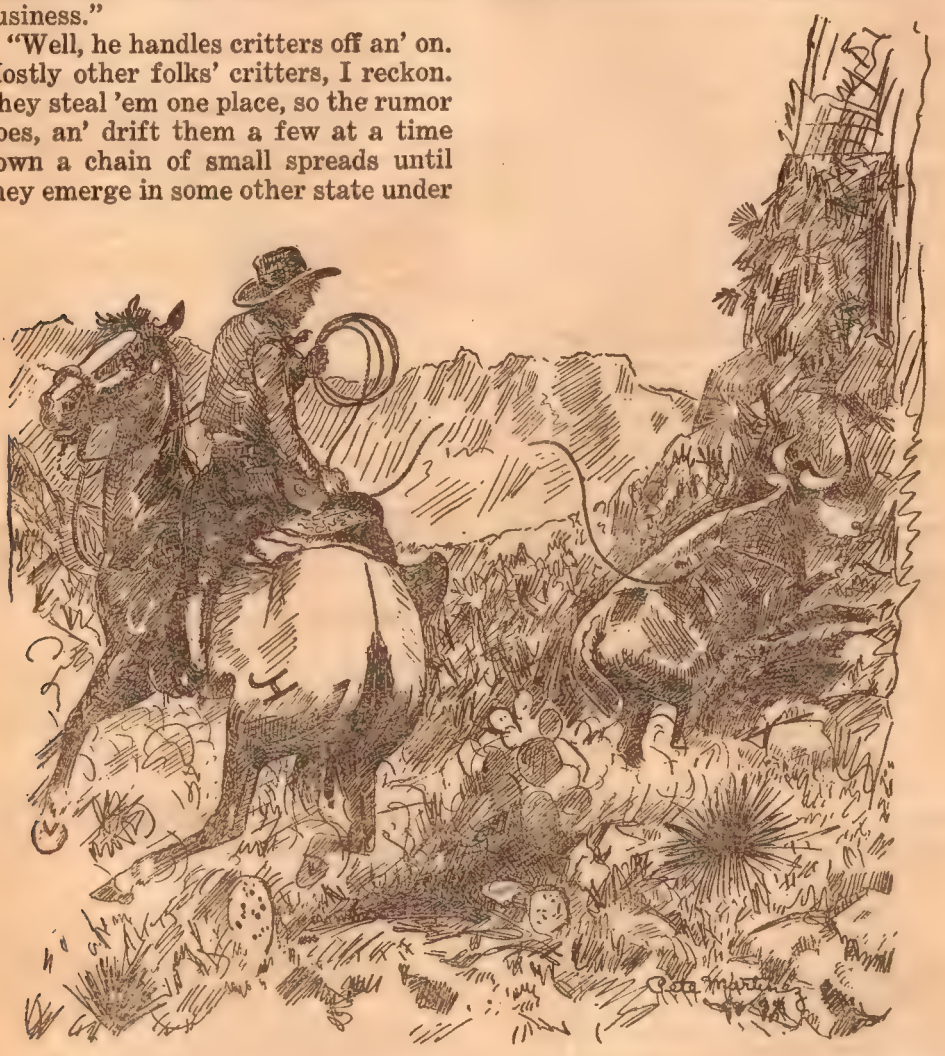
"Well, he handles critters off an' on. Mostly other folks' critters, I reckon. They steal 'em one place, so the rumor goes, an' drift them a few at a time down a chain of small spreads until they emerge in some other state under a diff'rent brand—a brand that's good as gold."

"I still don't see that—"

"Look!" the girl exclaimed. "If you happened to buy a ranch that was in the middle of his string, for instance, he'd be stuck with the cattle he had at the other end, wouldn't he? Well, then, he'd have to get you out; one way'd be burnin'. Somebody burned your place, didn't they?"

"Yer damn well shoutin'!" growled Jones, and spat. "Wot's more, they done poor Albut in!"

Lize looked questioningly at Jones. Shane said, "He means Alibi Smith, a fella I hired who's disappeared."



"Oh!" her face whitened. She laid a hand on Shane's arm. "I'm so sorry," she said impulsively. "Won't anyone ever stop him? Him and the men under him have practically made the boneyard at Tortilla Flat—"

"They may be decoratin' it themselves before this thing is finished.

Shane cut in grimly. "Do you know an ol' codger called Obe Struthers—"

"The mining man?"

Shane nodded.

"I've heard of him. He used to own the Copper King—"

"*Used* to own?" Shane's eyebrows raised. "Don't he own it no more?" Lize Corbin's eyes darkened swiftly. Her mouth was tight and white when she answered: "No—he sold out to Jarson Lume."

The muscles tightened along Shane's clenched jaw. "I thought," he said slowly, "that the Copper King was a pretty good thing."

"It was dang good, I reckon," Lize told him. "Jarson Lume don't never bother acquirin' mines what ain't no account."

Shane's cheeks paled with anger. To him it seemed plain that pressure—considerable pressure—must have been brought to bear on Struthers to effect this sudden sale.

"Where's Struthers now?"

"I heard he was hangin' out at the Miner's Rest. Someone said he was figgerin' to locate another bonanza. He'll be a fool if he does, 'cause Lume'll gobble it jest like he done the Copper King an' a whole passel of other mines in these here mountains."

"It's just possible, I'm allowin'," Shane drawled heavily, "that Lume'll be coughin' up these mines again. A fella can't never tell. Stranger things has happened." His eyes swept over the distant valley. "Cattle, all right," he said. "Some consid'rable. They're millin'—see? Them punchers is figurin' to rest 'em."

He looked appraisingly at Jones. "I'm wonderin' if you'd like to pay 'em a visit, Bless?"

Jones grinned felinely. "Yer sure said somethin' that time."

"Got plenty cartridges?"

Lize looked from Shane to Jones. Then she grabbed Shane's arm. "Don't do it, Sudden!" Her cheeks were paling in swift alarm. "Look—you couldn't cut it! There's six riders with them cow critters. Six to two! You wouldn't stand a chance!"

Shane smiled mirthlessly. "We wouldn't figure on stackin' up against them fellas. There's other ways a couple of smart hairpins could keep them steers from leavin' this country. How about it, Bless?"

"Yer on!" Jones said, and winked. "Might give 'em a bit of their own, wot?"

CHAPTER XII

HOOFBEATS FROM HELL

PROLONGED inactivity was awakening spluttering fires of impatience and discontent among the rank and file of Lume's renegade supporters. They wanted gold to spend in gambling at the camp. To get this so-necessary gold they must stage another robbery or stick up another stage or move their waiting cattle. Lume did not want any more robberies just now; things were shaping up, he said.

To stick up a stage right now would be fruitless and even dangerous, for Lume had taken over the last large independent mine and such gold as was being shipped belonged to him. As for moving the cattle—that was impossible. Tularosa had burned the big corrals at Keeler's Crossing where of old it had been customary to hold the critters while altered brands scabbed over, and still other brands were made through a wet blanket. The next ranch in their owl-hoot string was a long hard drive that must, in part, be pushed under the very nose of outraged authority.

But inactivity was bad, as Bronc Walders pointed out to Lume a short time after Hines and Latham had left on their lethal mission to Shane. Like the insidious growth of some unseen cancer it was undermining Lume's in-

fluence and dominance. Bronc Walders said as much.

"Look," he pointed out, "you better be givin' these wolves of yores somethin' to occupy their hands. When scum like them gets to usin' their hatracks, all hell is due to come apart!"

Lume grinned like a sleek black cat. "They're goin' to have their han's full pronto. Wimper—" he faced the pock-marked whiner with an abruptness that shrank the little man back against the wall— "when this meetin' breaks up you corral all the loose saddle bums that's loafin' round here, an' start shovin' them cattle we got at Horse Mesa on towards our Iron Mountain spread—"

"You can't do that!" Shoshone Mell jerked out. "Nobody can shove that bunch of wall-eyed brutes over that kinda country in a jump as long as—"

"I want them cows started for Iron Mountain before mornin'!" Lume's voice contained no compromise. "An' by hell, Wimper, that scum of yours better get 'em there." There was something in Lume's eyes as he said the last that set the pock-faced man a-shiver. Lume's glance then whipped to Mell.

"I'm wanting that Corbin dame, Mell. You an' Alder bring her in."

Mell rasped his unshaven jaw. "I ain't keen," he muttered hesitantly, "on monkeyin' with no damn skirt. Better pick someone else—"

"I'm pickin' *you*, Mell—you an' Birch Alder," Lume's voice was dangerously soft. "But I ain't askin' you to run such risk for nothing. There's two thousand apiece in it for you, if you can cut it. An'," he added ominously, "you better cut it."

Mell shrugged philosophically and took up some slack in his belt. "Uh-huh," he said.

Bronc Walders, watching, grinned behind his lips.

Lume looked at Alder curiously, calculation in his glance. "Got any notion where to look?"

Alder nodded. He said bruskly, "I'm allowin' we have. Mebbe you ain't noticed it, but that dame's a heap sweet on this Shane hairpin. Looks like aces to kings she'll be headin' for Keeler's Crossin'. I figger we'll amble over thataway a piece."

Bronc Walders' lips drew down; his eyes clouded up.

When Adler and his crony got up to leave several moments later, Bronc Walders arose, too. He was following them to the door when Lume said:

"Wait a minute, Bronc. I got a little somethin' I'd like to be talkin' over with you."

Walders turned and his eyes slid over Wimper who grinned ingratiatingly.

Walders said, "You ain't figurin', to *habla* 'bout anythin' private with that scissors-bill hangin' round, are you?"

Lume looked at Wimper. "Clear out, Wimper. I'll see you in the mornin'."

"Heck, I—" Wimper broke off short and scuttled for the door as Lume's cold glance started storming up. Lume sneered when the door slammed shut behind him. "Minds just like a dog."

"I wouldn't have a squirt like him around," Walders growled. "That little shrimp would sell his gran'mother down the river if he figured she'd bring a profit!"

Lume grinned. "You're gettin' jittery. Hell, I got Wimper right under my thumb. He's almost scared to breathe aroun' me."

Walders grunted. "Even a rat will bite." He looked at Lume inquiringly. "What was you wantin' to see me about?"

"I got some—" Letting his voice trail off, Lume reached inside his coat.

Something in his eyes must have given his intention away, for Walders' hand dove hipward frantically—too late!

Flame lanced wickedly from Lume's reappearing hand. Rocking, roaring reverbrations filled the room and set the lamplight flaring. Hot blood streamed down Bronc Walders' forehead and into his glazing eyes. He

staggered blindly, lips parting grotesquely as he swayed and dropped. His hat fell off and rolled across the floor and Jarson Lume laughed mockingly as he stood above him, his smoking pistol still in his hand.

Someone was pounding on the door, but Lume paid no heed.

"So Wimper'll double-cross me, eh?" he sneered, derision in his glance. "Well, you blasted ranger spy, I'm damned sure *you* won't write Shane no more notes!"

"WHEN Stone Latham finds out what Lume is up to there'll be hell a-poppin' sure!" Birch Alder said to Mell as they left the Square Deal and stood beside the hitchrack untying their horses' reins. "D'you reckon Lume knows what he's doin?"

"If he don't, it's sure enough high time he was findin' out," Mell grinned. "He may be cock-o'-the-walk in this man's camp, but Stone Latham is no safe man to fool with. You reckon that lousy Wimper really shoved a knife in Tularosa? Sounds mighty thin to me."

"Me, too," Alder concurred, swinging into the saddle. "Yuh know, Shoshone, I ain't real keen on this chore Lume has dished us out. I'd like it a heap better, I'm allowin', if Latham wasn't mixed up in it. He'll be after somebody's scalp damn sure!"

"Yeah, I reckon. But two thousand is two thousand, no matter where you spend it. I ain't seen that much money in a coon's age."

"We ain't seen it *yet, neither,*" Birch Alder reminded grimly. "I wouldn't put it past Lume to have us grab the dame an' then high-tail it without payin' off."

"He better not look like it," growled Shoshone Mell. "Let's git goin'."

"What we goin' to do if the dame's with Shane?"

"Hang round outa sight till Shane has business elsewhere. Hell, he can't wet-nurse her like a yearlin' calf! He's gotta leave 'er sometime. When he does is when we act. Dig spurs an' let's git started. I wanta git that dinero."

In the meantime, the irate Latham and Lefty Hines were halfway to Keeler's Crossing when Latham abruptly pulled in his horse. "You better camp here till mornin'," he told his companion. "Too damn dark to tackle the rest of the way tonight. Don't build no fire or—"

"What the hell?" growled Hines. "Ain't you goin' to be here?"

"Not sure, yet. I got a little matter to attend over round Weaver's Needle. If I can make it in time I'll join you."

"You don't think I'm figgerin' to tackle Shane by myself, do you?"

Latham sneered. "Hell, you can lay back of some boulder an' pot him off, can't you?"

"Not by myself, I can't! I got too much respect for my hide." Hines answered resentfully. "By cripes, I'm allowin' I'll wait right here till you git back."

"Don't be a fool. You—"

"I'd be a fool all right if I was to go solo after that damn leather-slapper!"

Latham regarded his companion thoughtfully in the starlight. He cleared his throat once or twice. Finally he remarked, "There ain't really any reason why we should jump this Shane, you know."

Hines started. After a moment's silence he said, "I guess you're right. What you got in mind?"

"It might not be a bad idea if we pulled out. Lume's headin' for the rocks. I got a feelin' the minute I clapped eyes on Shane that Jarson's number was damn well up I'm gettin' plumb fed up on his domineerin' ways, anyhow. What say we cut our stick? Lume's figurin' to ship out some dust tomorrow night. We might stop the stage an' make a haul." He looked at Hines craftily.

Hines shrugged. "Well, that suits me," he said. "But what about yore gal?"

A scowl crossed Latham's features and his high-boned cheeks grew dark. "What was that remark?"

Hines read a warning in that soft-toned purr. "I said," he muttered hastily, "that I'd be plumb proud to help you stop the stage."

Stone Latham grunted and relaxed. "A loose jaw," he remarked reminiscently, "has helped many a gent into a quiet bunk under boot-hill's weeds." He began pulling the saddle from his horse. "The fella that's learned to hobble his tongue is the gent who's goin' to live long enough to be tellin' boogery tales to his gran'children. Let's rest these nags a spell."

THE western sky glowed like molten copper as the sun slid down behind the purple mountain crests and flung their elongated shadows obliquely out across the valley. There was not much grass here and Wimper, as he sat his saddle gazing out across the restless cattle, was feeling boogery. It might be wiser, he opined, to shove them on a bit and risk the chance of scanter forage than to remain in this rimrocked hole where the cattle were plainly uneasy.

Yet is was getting late in the afternoon and he did not relish the thought of pushing these lowing brutes across this treacherous terrain once night fell. The valley's lack of water was the factor which finally decided him. He beckoned a circling rider.

When the fellow rode up, Wimper said, "Shove 'em on. We'll try for a better place. This hole's too blasted dry an' hot. Come night, these critters'll be in a mood to bolt if a cricket squeaks. Get 'em rollin', Ed."

The puncher scowled. "We might have to bed 'em down in a worser place," he objected.

Wimper went ugly and his hand dropped suggestively to his hip. "Who's roddin' this drive?" His voice held no sign of its usual whine. His pockmarked face flamed darkly. "You go pass the word along that we're movin'—now!"

The rider muttered, but cantered off.

Soon the moving cattle were rolling up a stifling cloud of dust as they streamed eastward from the valley, swinging down a wide stone-carpeted draw. This soon widened to such an extent that Wimper felt justified in hoping it might broaden into another valley. A bigger one perhaps, with grass.

An hour later his hope came true. The forward-dancing shadows of the bawling herd reached out across an undulating plain. Waving grasses that reached knee-high attested to the presence of water. "Springs, most likely," Wimper growled to one of his companions. "Start 'em millin', Joe."

Joe and the others did their work well and two hours later, having detailed three men to circle riding, Wimper returned to the tiny campfire the cook had been sweating over and had supper with the rest. At nine-thirty he wrapped himself up in his blanket and lay down with his booted feet to the fire . . . . Sometime in the night Wimper sat bolt upright, staring into the dark. The fire was reduced to a heap of glowing embers. There was no moon and only a few faint stars were visible in the leaden vault of heaven. Miles away a lightning flash threw a pale illumination and was gone. An unknown fear held Wimper motionless.

A breath of cooler air brushed his tautened cheeks. In the darkness around him he could hear the swishing of the long grasses in the gathering wind. Scattered drops of rain struck down. Ashes swirled about the embers of the campfire. Wimper shivered.

A pulse of nervous excitement beat against his throat. Yards away his attention was caught and held; his eyes dilated. Something was stirring soundlessly in that yonder gloom. Its movements held the stealth of a stalking cat—a mountain cat. A fear, swift and searing, brought him to his feet with a muttered oath.

His bulging eyes clung fascinated to that dim-seen, swift-flitting shadow

in the lesser darkness of the midnight gloom. There came a sound like the crunch of booted feet on gravel. The deep bronze of Wimper's cheeks gave place to a sickly pallor. Throat parched with fear he yanked his gun. But he did not fire. Thunder rumbled hollowly in the distance on the heels of another lightning flash. Wimper held his lean-muscled little body motionless. Only the close-set restless eyes stabbing here, there, and all about gave hint of the tension under which he labored. Then suddenly—

"Hell!" he cried.

Off there in the night, northeastward, a point of light was flickering, growing, red against the murk. And even as Wimper stared another tiny flame licked up from farther to the north and gathered headway rapidly, fanned by the wind sweeping through the swishing grasses.

With twitching body and the desperation of a trapped rat Wimper scuttled for his horse, colliding with another form which—springing from its blankets—seemed motivated by the same idea. Wimper cursed with lurid fury as fear spurred him to his feet. Both men reached their horses simultaneously, jerked the saddle cinches tight and flung themselves aboard.

Wimper flung one hurried look backward across his shoulder. "Roll yore tail, boy! That fire'll be a ragin' fury inside the next two minutes!"

The puncher, too, looked rearward. The flames were gaining headway fast; great fiery tongues were showing above a dense black rolling cloud of smoke that was pouring toward the bedded herd.

"What about the cattle?"

"To hell with the blasted cattle!" Wimper shouted, and used his spurs with desperation. Well, he knew that once those cattle tore loose all the cowboys in the world could never stop their headlong rush within a distance of several miles—and that fire would drive them the very way that he, too, was forced to head. It was not a thought one cared to linger on, and Wimper was doing no lingering.

HIS big roan ran for all it was worth, but now above its pounding hoofs Wimper could hear the frightened bawling of the cattle as they came lumbering to their feet. Somewhere not far behind him a frenzied steer let out a defiant challenge that set the herd in motion.

Again Wimper flashed a look behind. Three of his men were strung out there on pounding ponies. Behind them like the fantastic background of some melodramatic painting plunged the bawling herd, tails up, a churning indistinct bellowing mass of frenzied beef.

Wimper shuddered and drove his lathering horse with quirt and spur. Where were the rest of his men? Cut off between the herd and fire? Or gone down beneath that sea of slashing hoofs? Wimper dared not think, but feared the worst.

With heartbreaking effort, nose and tail outthrust in one straight forward-hurtling line above its pistoning legs, Wimper's horse held its own against that thundering horde behind.

When next he looked only one man rode behind him. The horns of the leading steers were scant inches from the rump of this white-faced fellow's mount. Wimper strained the aching muscles that were driving his spurs and quirt. But his horse was giving its utmost now. Not another fraction of speed could the gallant animal produce.

The minutes clicked by with drumming beat. Cold sweat broke out on Wimper's back and neck and face as a sobbing cry went up behind which was instantly blotted in the noise of that wild stampede. Smoke, hurled by the rising wind across the backs of the snorting, bellowing herd, swirled about his head and brought tears streaming from his smarting eyes.

Some minutes passed and he dared another glance behind. He could see

the lightning playing across that sea of tossing horns. The herd was gaining, gaining, gaining, and—he rode alone! Chill rain came down in torrents, lashed stinging across his ashen face. He knew that he was in the pass now, though he could not see a thing on either side or even ahead, for the clatter of hoofs rose hard from off its rocky floor. Even the flickering glow of the fire-licked grasses was left behind by the canyon's twistings and only his horse's instinct served as guide through this pouring murk.

CHAPTER XIII

Stage Driver Strategy

"THAT storm is comin' bloody fast," Jones shouted in Shane's ear as, the fire started, they headed for their horses on the run. "Be doin' damn well if we make that camp where we left the girl before she strikes! We'd better be making tracks pronto!"

The jarring thunder of pounding hoofs rang loud in his ears, hurled forward by the gusty wind that plastered his sodden shirt against his back. His heart was in his throat; he was shaking as with ague. Then suddenly his horse had lost its stride, was skidding on the slimy gumbo under foot and was going down. His equine scream was tangled with Wimper's sobbing cry. Then both were lost beneath the hoofs of the lumbering steers.

Shane wasted no time in words but sprinted faster.

They reached the horses. Shane's blue roan was moving at a hard run when he settled his lean frame in the saddle and his other foot found the swinger stirrup. Then he spoke, the wind tearing words from his mouth.

"All hell's goin'—come apart—"

A malicious grin curled Bless Jones' lips. "'Ere's one night I'm bloody will glad I ain't no blarsted rustler!"

They rode in silence then, their upper bodies bent forward over their ponies' necks. This onrushing storm was going to play hell with the mountain trails, and they knew it and had no desire for it to overtake them out of shelter.

"Reckon this'll teach that blarsted Lume ter mind 'is P's an' Q's!"

"I allow it'll mebbe save the bulk of some rancher's cattle," Shane roared back. "Between the fire an' the storm them steers are goin' to cover some rearward territory, or my name ain't Sudden Shane."

He felt no more regret for the possible loss of life their move might spell than he had felt for the deaths of other men his .45 had heralded. The men who were with those cattle were rustlers, thieves who were constantly preying on the small-spread ranchers who strove so valiantly to keep body and soul together in the bleak and desolate wilderness of this mountain country.

Should proper authorities have captured Lume's long-loop riders, and an honest and unprejudiced trial gone through, they would have hanged. His move in stampeding the stolen herd had saved both the ranchers and the state a deal of money. He felt no modicum of regret for what he'd done, but only a coldly grim satisfaction.

They arrived at last within sight of the cave, yet still a good half mile away. Then rain lashed down across their shoulders and stung their faces. Though they managed to get on their slickers without halting, their clothes were sopping wet before they could get them on.

They rode in shivering silence, listening to the wild beat of the wind-flung rain, and the squashy *plopping* of their ponies' hoofs. Shane huddled forward in his saddle, squinted eyes peering through the murky, watery gloom ahead in vain endeavor to catch a glimpse of the campfire they'd built inside the cave for Lize.

It seemed an eternity to Shane before they sloshed to a halt before the hole-pierced cliff that once had been the home of forgotten cave dwellers. Shane's eyes abruptly widened. He could catch the reflected play of the firelight now where it struck tangently from the entrance. In its glow he could see that Lize Corbin's horse was gone from where he'd left it hobbled!

He left the saddle with a ripped-out curse, struck the shaley ground on skidding boot heels and vanished inside the cave to reappear a moment later with a face gone ghastly white.

"She's gone!" he blurted crazily. "*Gone!* Some polecat's been here and carried her off! Oh, Jones, I'll cut his black heart out when I get him!" His voice was filled with a merciless hate.

Bless Jones returned his stare in stunned surprise. His expression seemed to say that such a thing was impossible. "Gorn?" he echoed. "Then it's Lume or some of 'is 'ellions' as got 'er!"

Shane's face, in the reddish glow of the firelight, was twisted by his emotions. Hot rage was gleaming from his smoky eyes that were alive with the portent of imminent volcanic action. There came a drive to his voice that made Jones stiffen in his saddle.

"We're headin' for Tortilla Flat. If we don't find Lize Corbin, or if a hair of her head's been harmed, we'll take that camp apart an' hang Jarson Lume from the awning of his own damned joint!"

THE shortest way to Tortilla Flat from where they were was by way of the old stage road from Phoenix, which passed through Mesa, Apache Junction, Youngsburg and Mormon Flat. Shane intended to strike the road somewhere between Youngsburg and Mormon Flat. It was almost morning now. They could not possibly reach their destination before the darkness that now was thinning to a watery gray gloom closed again about this desolate land. But, determined to make the best time possible, Shane—

followed by the faithful ex-Cockney—started at once.

There was no trail where Shane was leading, not even a ghost of a trail. He picked his way by instinct and traversed canyons apparently choked with rock rubble from ancient slides; he crossed barriers that would have stopped another man before he started. Up and down he led, and round and about great bluffs and mesas. The storm passed on or they left it behind, and the sun shone down upon their backs with unrelenting fury while they pushed doggedly on with neither food nor water.

Only Shane's iron will kept them going when they came to the bleak and shimmering alkaline expanse of some ancient lake bed. Heat waves crinkled and folded above its forgotten floor and the white, clinging alkaline dust rose about them in clouds that brought tears from their reddened, stinging eyes and made breathing, even through the screening folds of their neckerchiefs, an almost unbearable ordeal.

Jones asked once if Shane thought they were lost. Shane growled back some sardonic reply which Jones did not catch. But after that Jones kept still.

Their lips grew parched and cracked as the long hot hours dragged inchingly past. Their nostrils burned as though scorched by the flames of hell itself, and their tongues became immovable cottony lumps whose swelling threatened to stop their breathing entirely. Dust devils, whipped up by a furnace wind, whirled across their path and one came apart above them, literally showering them with its cargo of superheated grit. Long since their eyes had closed to merest squinting slits, their eyeballs seared by the burning glare. Talk was impossible and neither man attempted it.

Noon finally came. The torture of the lake bed lay behind. Ahead lay the scarcely lesser torture of the blistering dun expanse of cactus-dotted desert. Above them a buzzard serenely circled the brassy sky on outspread wings while the flaying sun beat down without respite.

They did not stop. They knew their horses could not last much longer, but a glance at Shane's face told Jones that to remonstrate—even if he succeeded in making himself understood—would be useless. Shane's eyes held but a single purpose which was unswervable and adamant. He meant to reach Tortilla Flat and Lume in the shortest possible time, and the grim-clenched line of his stubborn jaw forecast that all hell was not going to stop him.

The hot rays of the burning sun beat down upon this arid land like brassy hammers. Shane led doggedly on, grim as some ancient mariner. Their ponies gave out before the desert was spanned and they abandoned them, staggering on afoot.

Late afternoon found them studying the tracks of three horses leading across a lone, pine-shaded plateau. There were puffs of earth before and behind each print, showing the animals had been moving at a gallop.

Shane stared at Jones from red-rimmed bloodshot eyes. "That's them," he croaked, and went lurching on. Somehow, somewhere, Jones found the guts to follow, though his face was puffed and black beneath its crust of alkali dust.

Ten minutes later they came to a spring among some rocks. Shane drank cautiously, barely wetting his long-numb lips. He jerked Jones back with guttural noises when the man would have sated his fearful thirst; fought with him, forced him to do as he himself was doing.

An hour passed while they rested and washed the sticky white grime from face and neck and brows. They had no energy to spare in cuffing the grit from their clothing, but lay stretched out in intolerable weariness on the needle-carpeted ground beneath the pines.

When the hour had worn itself out Shane got to his feet. "C'mon," he

croaked. "We're movin'." He started off, his hat shoved back from his forehead to let the evening breeze lap coolly across its sweaty surface.

As long shadows from the distant mountains reached down across the country, they sighted a tiny ranch tucked away in a hollow. When they got near, Shane gruffed a greeting. A man stepped from the cabin door, a rifle held loosely in the crook of his arm. He eyed them scowlingly, not offering to speak.

"We wanta buy a coupla hosses," Shane got out with effort.

"Ain't got no broncs that are fer sale."

Shane's eyes swept across a pole corral inside which half a dozen horses eyed them curiously.

"How 'bout them?"

"Not fer sale," the surly ranchman said without compromise.

Shane did not compromise either. "You're a liar!"

Up came the rancher's rifle. His jaw swung forward menacingly. "Git!" There were pale fires in his catlike yellow gaze.

Shane half turned as though to go. His right hand slapped leather. Livid flame reached out from the explosion at his hip. The rifleman crashed back against the cabin wall with a bullet through his chest. The rifle clattered on the steps.

But the fellow was game. One hand clawed desperately for the belt gun in the tied-down holster on his leg. The flat sharp crack of Shane's pistol made a faint flutter of sound in the immense silence of the gathering dusk. The boss of this hidden ranch sagged back against the wall, slid down it to a sitting posture, then toppled forward to sprawl inertly across the dusty steps.

Shane pushed fresh cartridges in his gun, lips framed in a snarl. "Go hunt us up some saddles, Bless. We'll want two of these broncs apiece."

Fifteen minutes later they rode out at a fast canter, each leading an extra horse. Night's thickening shadows swiftly hemmed them. In the east a lopsided yellow moon climbed into the purple sky. The stars paled before its argent glory.

FROM a shelf of rimrock Shane and Jones stared down upon a winding, pale white ribbon of road that led up out of a dim-seen valley. They had changed horses several times in getting here and they had made good time. They were looking down upon the stage road to Phoenix, about two miles west of Tortilla Flat. Two unknown riders had just swung onto the trail below them. Shane's interest in them seemed strangely acute to Jones.

"Think yer know 'em?" he asked softly.

Shane said in a low whisper, "I'm bettin' one of 'em's Stone Latham—just his build an' sits the saddle similar."

"What yer reckon they're up ter?"

"*Quien sabe?*" Shane said, and shrugged. "However, we'll soon find out. Listen!"

Through the cold crisp moonlit air came the sound of wagon wheels, the jingling of chains and the clupping of pulling horses. The sounds came from the direction of Tortilla Flat. A moment later they saw the stage lurch round a bend and come careening toward them. They could hear above the wagon squeaks and the plopping pound of hoofs the singing snap of the driver's whip. They could see the shotgun guard upon the box.

"Look," Shane whispered, and following his pointing hand Jones saw that the two men in the road had vanished.

"Stick-up!" he muttered hoarsely.

"Sh-h-h! Looks like a double-cross, to me."

The stage came steadily on, the horses pulling against their harness on the steadily rising grade. Shane and Jones could hear the driver's profane talk; could make snatches of it out above the rattle of the wheels. The coach lurched violently once as a wheel

dropped into a chuckhole, careened toward the abyss that bounded the road's outer edge and seemed for an instant in danger of going off. But with lurid oaths and skilful handling of the lines the driver kept his four-horse team moving and the coach still on the road.

Jones took a deep breath. "Whew!"

Shane did not take his eyes from the scene below. "Close," came the driver's voice, and he spat over the wheel nonchalantly. "But I've had closter," he confided to the guard. "Dang lucky they ain't no passengers aboard. Reckon 'twould have scairt the liver outen 'em. Git-ap, there!"

Two mounted shadows stepped into the road ahead of the lumbering stage. There was a glint of metal and a lance of flame. Another. Two reports rocked against the rimrock where Shane and Jones crouched watching. One of the lead horses was down. The shotgun guard bent double and toppled from the box. An oath left the driver's lips and he hurriedly raised his hands as the stage lurched to a violent stop against the heap of kicking horses.

Three more shots rang out and the horses' struggles ceased.

"Anybody in that stage?" came Latham's voice.

"No." The driver's tone was quavery as though he knew how close he sat to death.

The faces of the holdup men were masked, but anyone would have recognized Latham's voice, had they ever heard it. "Must be figurin' to quit the country," Shane thought grimly.

"All right," snapped Latham's voice, "come down outa it!"

"Comin'," the driver gulped meekly. Wrapping his lines about the brake, he stepped gingerly down over the wheel and stood with his hands stretched as far above his head as Nature would permit.

The man with Latham dismounted and started toward the stage, very likely with the intention of relieving it of some of its more valuable cargo. But it will never be known for sure. Shane had seen enough.

"Drop that bird," he muttered close

to Jones' ear. "I'll take care of Latham."

In the moon's soft glow that washed the road with blue radiance, Jones took aim and fired. The sound of the shot tore a hole through the night. Latham's companion in thievery doubled up and crumpled forward in the dust. Latham's horse reared with snorting fright just as Shane fired and took Shane's bullet from end to end. Down it went in a thrashing heap. But even as it fell Stone Latham left its back and, amid a very hail of lead, dashed to his companion's mount. He vaulted into the saddle and was gone just as a mass of fleecy cloud passed below the moon and snuffed its light.

"Which way'd 'e go?" snarled Jones, peering wildly over the rimrock's edge. "Wot did yer want ter let 'im git away fer?"

Shane snorted. "I didn't do it a-purpose, an' you can stick a pin in that!"

Just then, with the same suddenness with which it had passed from sight, the moon surged free of its entangling cloud and again illumined the ribbon of road. It showed Stone Latham spurring madly along the trail to camp.

"There 'e goes, the blarsted gopher!" Jones growled. "Let me at my 'oss!"

"Hold on," Shane said, and grabbed him by the shirt. "Take it easy. Latham don't know who blew his game up Bitter Crick. Wait—we'll stand a better chance in town. We'll get him in Tortilla. Let's go down an' *habla* with that driver."

But when Jones had got cooled down sufficiently to listen, the stage driver was no longer to be seen. Evidently he had had all the shooting he was wanting for one night and had taken his chance and ducked.

"Wot abaht the gold?"

"If there's any on the stage, it prob'ly belongs to Lume. T'hell with it! C'mon, we're headin' for town."

CHAPTERR XIV

Guns of Hate

GREED, greed, greed! Shane thought disgustedly as he rode through the soft, enfolding moonlight toward a reckoning with Lume. He would be glad to shake forever from his boots the dust of this turbulent Tortilla Flat. People round this country has gold colic so bad it was all they thought or talked about.

The mood of a moment ago was gone and the driving anger of that time when he had found Lize Corbin no longer in the cave was on him. The reckoning with Lume, he told himself, could not come too soon. Lume had done his best to get him killed off; Lume had stolen for a pittance old Obe Struthers' mine, and had robbed many another of his rightful property. And now Lume had overstepped the safety mark. He had had Lize Corbin kidnaped! The day of retribution was about to dawn.

"Wot yer figgerin' ter do when we get ter town?" Jones presently asked.

"I'm goin' to hunt up Jarson Lume, find out what they've done with Lize, then give Lume what he's been askin' for ever since he got here!"

"Kinder tall order, wot? 'Adn't yer better take 'em one at a time?"

"You keep out of this, Jones." Shane scowled grimly. "This is my fight, an' I don't want no help nor need any. I'll show these damned scorpions a thing or two they'll be a right smart while forgettin'!"

Jones looked at him sideways and grinned.

Shane's grim lips relaxed in a sudden smile. "Well, mebbe I did sound kinda boastful," he admitted, "but I'm allowin' I'm big enough to handle this situation without no help. An' there ain't no sense nohow in you gettin' mixed up in this fracas. You was

hired to build a coupla buildin's on that spread I bought an' to help repair some more an' the corrals an' such-like. You wasn't hired for your gun, Bless."

"Well, wot the bloody 'ell do yer think I'm a-carryin' this 'ere smoke-pole fer?" Jones asked indignantly. "Ter scare mosquitoes off? Not 'arf! A fine bloke I'd be ter stand around meek as Moses w'ile them curly wolves got yer ready fer the undertaker, wot? Look 'ere, yer glory-'oggin idjit! W'en the bullets starts ter flyin' the Earl o' Cockney's li'l son 'Orace aims ter be right w'ere 'e can 'ear their blinkin' w'istles; An' yer can kiss the Stone on that!"

Though it was almost midnight when they reached the town it was plain to Shane and Jones that no citizen was in his bed unless he were held there by a malady or gunshot wound. The camp's night life was at full blast and a noisy blare of raucous sound destroyed the quiet serenity of the nocturne breeze.

Overhead, far up in the purple heavens, the stars peered down with awe. The dusty road ahead of Shane was splashed with crisscross bars of yellow light that poured from open doors and windows, for though the night was cool the activities of the larger part of Tortilla Flat's inhabitants were badly in need of the soothing influence of pure, clean air.

Dismounting at the hitchrack fronting the Square Deal, Shane and Jones flipped their reins about the rail and strode within. Shane's firm, unhurried stride carried him to where a blank wall was at his back, and Jones took up a position there beside him. Both men manufactured cigarettes while accustoming their eyes to the glare of fifty lamps.

The atmosphere was heavy with the odors of leather, stale liquor, sweat, smoke and dust. The cigarette smoke swirled in heavy strata a foot beneath the balcony ceiling, and the air above that level was blue with it. There were oaths and raucous laughter, flashing smiles and gleaming, hateful eyes; while over all resounded the banged-out notes of an old off-key piano.

Here and there along the line of men bellying the ornate bar, space was left for a drunken companion who no longer had the use of his legs, but sat sprawled limply upon the footrail of gleaming brass.

ABOVE the gaming tables were hunched great dark-faced cowmen—big, bronzed, serious men whose cheeks were networks of intent wrinkles and whose gnarled hands were never far from the butts of ready weapons. The stakes were high. One false move on an opponent's part would have brought his death in an avenging blast of gunfire.

Shane and Jones leaned their backs against a wall and watched the room through squinted eyes while they languidly puffed their smokes.

A big breed went slouching past, his swarthy face writhed in a scowl, one arm in a dirty sling. The minute remainder of a corn-husk *cigarro* showed between his thick lips and a burning resentment was in his glance.

Olive-skinned women, slender creatures of sensuous rhythm glided by, their red lips parted in flashing smiles, their luring eyes twin pools of slumberous dusk neath sweeping lashes.

Through the wavering smoke Shane saw a pair of men leave Lume's private room beneath the balcony stairs. They did not observe him and Jones smoking placidly against the wall across the room, but headed toward them, making for the swinging doors.

Jones said from a corner of his mouth, "Hin a bloody 'urry, if yer arskin' me!"

The first man was a solidly built gent, muscular and heavy of face. Evil thoughts through turbulent years had drawn down a corner of his mouth and creased it in a perpetual sneer and there was a sneaking droop to his big

shoulders. As he came hurrying forward his hands swung close to the .45's he wore on either hip. It was Birch Alder, Shane was staring at, though he had no means of knowing this; nor, had he known, would it have made any difference.

For Shane's glance went swiftly past Alder and came to rest in narrowing intensity on the man behind. He was tall, rawboned and gaunt. He had a lantern jaw and heavy eyes beneath the rakish tilt of a down-pulled hatbrim. He moved with a saddle-bound swagger that just now seemed filled with wrath. His dark and lean-carved face showed anger, too. His lips were set in a vicious snarl.

Shane shoved abruptly free of the wall against which he had been leaning, hands hanging loosely at his sides. Alder did not notice. But the other did. Shane saw the bold eyes swinging toward him, focus upon his face and harden, narrow. The snarl slid off the fellow's lips as he swung to a sudden halt, and his right hand brushed the polished walnut of his gun butt.

Then, leisurely, the man came in, lips curving in a cynical grin. He came urbanely on until he stood facing Shane with right thumb hooked in gunbelt across a three-foot interval.

"H o w d y, catawampus. Thirsty weather, ain't it?"

"I know a place that's thirstier," Shane drawled coldly. "L a t h a m, where's Lize Corbin at?" His glance beat hard as flint against Stone Latham's high-boned cheeks.

Latham met his scrutiny amusedly, antagonistic mockery in his gleaming eyes.

"Why ask me?" he sneered. "If I was to foller all the pregrinations of a hustlin' skirt like Li—"

His voice broke off in a startled grunt as Shane's right fist rocked hard against his jaw. All the pent-up hate and bitter fury of weeks were in that blow, and it smashed Stone Latham backward to his knees. Before he could recover, Shane's left came up beneath his chin and sprawled him motionless on his back with glazing eyes.

A stunned sort of stillness gripped the hall for a space of seconds. Then, Alder, who had caught the last of the scene from the tail of his eyes, let a hand streak hipward for his gun. Other hands sped holsterward for vengeance.

"Kill the damned outlander!"

"Rub 'im out!"

"Get him, boys!" snarled Alder, and jerked his weapon free.

Shane's hand slapped leather as gun thunder shook the room, awakening monstrous echoes that jarred the swirling smoke and drove bystanders headlong in search of nearest shelter.

Black holes appeared like magic in the wall above and about Shane's crouching back. With slitted eyes he crouched there in the garish light of fifty lamps. The swift tattoo of his belching gun drove men frantically for doors and windows. Birch Alder, clutching at his stomach in sobbing agony, had hardly struck the floor before the place was cleared; deserted, save for himself and the grinning Jones and the three still forms that sprawled grotesquely near Latham's groaning crony.

Bless Jones abruptly swore. 'E's gorn!" he snarled excitedly.

"What—"

"Latham! 'E's flitted like a bloody bird!"

True enough; Latham, indeed, was gone—vanished in those few tumultuous seconds!

"T HE b a c k r o o m!" Shane snapped, and headed for it stuffing fresh cartridges in the emptied chambers of his pistol, boot heels thumping hollowly.

Jones beat him to it, flung back the door and cursed.

"E m p t y! The bloody sparrow's 'opped!"

"Quick!" Shane cried, sprinting for the swinging doors. "Don't let 'em get away!"

But they were too late. In the distance they could hear the muffled pound of fleeing hoofs as they stood by the hitchrack fronting Lume's Square Deal. The crowd came surging back. Shane grabbed a man and demanded: "Where's Jarson Lume? Talk quick, fella, 'cause I'm in a sod-pawin' mood an' I'd as lief horn ye as not!"

With chattering teeth the fellow shook his head. "Good cripes," he gasped, "don't take it out on me! I ain't seen Lume for fifteen minutes!"

"Where is he?" Shane glared wildly at the crowd who shrank back before the things to be read in his blazing eyes. "Where is he? Speak up quick, by hell, or I'll tear this camp apart!"

"What's wrong, pardner?" growled a bearded, booted fellow in a red flannel shirt. "You look some riled up. Someone stole yore lollypop?"

"Some of Lume's stinkin' hellions 've kidnaped Lize Corbin!"

Low growls of anger rose. But a man near Shane sneered knowingly. "I reckon," he said, "she won't be mindin' such a heap, mister. Lize, she's—"

Shane's right fist spun the man headlong in the dusty road. Shane's cold voice lashed the crowd like icy water:

"If there's any more white-livered sneaks in this stinkin' camp aimin' to insult a decent woman behind her back, now's the time to do it!"

A frozen silence held the group. One or two shifted their feet uneasily. Several surreptitiously departed.

Shane's cold drawl was contemptuous: "Then get the hell out of here."

"Wot next?" Jones asked with a tickled grin.

"Look over these nags that tied up here an' pick us out a couple good ones that's long on endurance an' look like they might have a fairish amount of speed. I'm allowin' I've got a hankerin' to cast my eyes round Lume's establishment once more afore we roll our tails. Be with you in three shakes. Get some canteens an' see that they're filled with water. Rustle a coupla saddle bags of food, too, while you're at it. The trail we're takin' mightn't have no stops."

Wheeling then, Shane went back inside the deserted Square Deal. A bartender stood staring idiotically at the dead men on the floor. A sawbones was bending anxiously above Birch Alder's prostrate form. Shane paid them no attention, but took the balcony stairs three at a time. One by one he went through the rooms that faced its railing. Three were empty. Four held terrified, huddling girls who shrank away from his burning glance. Then he came to Number Ten—the room he was to have shared with the late Bill Halleck.

It, too, was empty. Shane was about to turn away when his eyes caught sight of a crumpled bit of paper slightly protruding from beneath the pillow on the bunk.

Bending, he picked it up and smoothed it out upon a knee. Three scrawled words leapt to his glance like tongues of flame:

Lume—help—Lize

He thrust the paper mechanically in his pocket. The muscles of his jaws stood out in tense rigidity. So Lume *had* got her, had he? Shane's lips tightened grimly. Cold glints of fury entered his smoky eyes as he swung to the door and out upon the balcony and down the stairs. His boots thumped hollowly in the unaccustomed silence and the tinkling of his big-roweled spurs was like the sound of clashing sabers as he crossed the deserted floor.

The doctor looked up from Birch Alder's motionless body. "I guess he's finished," he said conversationally.

"There'll be a lot more polecats finished before I get through," Shane growled, and pushed through the swinging doors into a burst of exploding light. How he escaped that murderous salvo Shane never knew. But something—buck fever, possibly—might have unsettled Mell's aim. For Mell it was; Shane saw him crouching

at the porch edge with a shotgun in his hands.

Mell had no chance to use the gun again. Like magic Shane's gun seemed to leap to his hand and bark. Mell went over backwards off the porch with a bullet between his eyes.

From across the street Jones came running awkwardly, a pair of saddle bags flapping from each shoulder; skin water bags filled his hands. "Wot's up? Wot's up 'ere, eh? Wot's orl this shootin' abaht?" he panted.

Shane took a pair of saddle bags and one of the canteens. "Where's the broncs?"

"Right 'ere," Jones said, and led the way to where a pair of wall-eyed, long-legged broncs stamped restlessly beside the rail.

"Will them suit?"

"Yeah. Let's get goin'," said Shane, stepping into the saddle atop a blue roan. "Lume an' whoever's with him prob'ly took the same direction as Latham."

"That's right, fella," a scrawny youth said, nodding. "I seen 'em. Haff a hour ago, it was. They was headin' off to'ards Globe. There's a short cut—"

But Shane was waiting for no more. The blue roan lunged forward beneath his prodding spurs. With a wink at the gaping boy, Jones too put spurs to his mount and went pelting in Shane's wake.

CHAPTER XV

Hell on Wheels

THE lofty spires of the Superstition Range were etched ruggedly black against the starry skyline. For what seemed like centuries Shane and Bless Jones rode in silence, the vast quiet of the open spaces hemming them like a shroud. The only sounds to lend accompaniment to the clatter of hoofs were the creak of saddle leather and the occasional jingling of spur chains.

Slowly the moon grew dimmer. One by one the stars faded and vanished from the brightening heavens. In the cold, pale light of dawn they stepped stiffly from their saddles. Jones walked the horses up and down to prevent their cooling too swiftly while Shane cast round for sign.

A bleak wind rattled eerily through the chaparral as Shane examined the trail. Tired and weary as he was, the smoky eyes beneath his puckered brows were keenly alert. He well knew the possibilities they ran of being ambushed. A thing like that would find appeal in Latham's Indian blood.

Striding out upon a bare escarpment overlooking a tiny valley far below, Shane pondered the fact that only one set of fresh tracks showed in this trail. Where had Lume gone with the girl? Did Latham know and was he short-cutting in an effort to head them off?

Still eyeing the valley through a rift in the morning mist, Shane shrugged. The roaring surge of anger that had taken him so recklessly into Lume's camp and dive a few short hours ago with the desire to rend and maim had cooled. The desire still pulsed through his veins, but it was a yearn now purged of impulse—a controlled anger, a deep abiding hate that

would brook no obstacle to its deadly path.

He rejoined Jones where he walked their horses up and down a narrow stretch of trail.

"Find anythin'?"

"Latham's ridin' a cold trail. Either he's not figurin' to join up with Lume's party, or else he's takin' some kinda short cut to where he thinks they're headin' for. Anyhow, we're stickin' to Latham; I've a hunch he knows what he's doin'. Let's go."

The sun climbed into a cloudless sky, its rays burning brighter with each passing moment. Half an hour passed and only the occasional click of a horse's shoe against a rock or pebble betrayed the presence of Shane and Jones on the needle-carpeted trail along the timbered ridges. They climbed steadily higher into the mountains. The horses' hearts thumped softly against their knees.

Shane's blue roan set the pace, a swift running walk that often broke into a trot where the going was easier —a pace that would put long miles behind a rider between sunup and dark, yet leave his mount with plenty of steam.

It was nearing noon when Shane, riding in the lead, suddenly drew in his horse and pointed silently. A group of tracks sheared into their trail from the northwest. Three separate sets of tracks, Shane pointed out. Jones nodded.

Shane said, "Latham guessed right. I'm allowin' he's saved us a heap of time, Bless. I'm allowin' them prints belongs to Lume an' his party. One would be Lume's horse, another Lize's. That means he's only got one man with him. He sure must have left town hellity-larrup to be travelin' so light. Somethin' must have give him a scare."

Jones nodded. "Yer reckon it was Latham?"

"Can't say. It's a cinch Latham wasn't in town when Lume pulled out with the girl."

"Mebbe they've split," Jones suggested hopefully. "I ain't never put no great store in this talk abaht honor amongst thieves."

"Well, Latham's on their trail, anyhow. An' that's the main thing. We better be shovin' on."

"Where d'yer reckon they're goin'?" Jones asked after fifteen minutes of silent riding. "That feller back in Tortilla said Globe, didn't 'e?"

"He wouldn't know nothin' about Lume's plans. He said they'd hit out on the Globe trail. But these tracks now are pointin' dead on for Silver King. I'm thinkin' we'll be findin' 'em there."

"Well, 'ere's 'opin'!" Jones said. "My backbone's a-rubbin' up ag'in m' blinkin' stomach an' if we 'ave ter ride much further I'm goin' ter fall plumb asleep right 'ere in m' bloody saddle!"

HALF an hour later as they were rounding a bend of a rock-choked canyon, a scant two miles from Silver King, the sultry afternoon quiet was shattered by a shot. Something tugged at Shane's neckerchief—it was that close—as the report beat back against the towering walls in dimming echoes.

The abruptness of Jones' stopping sent up tiny bursts of dust. "Look out!" he yelled.

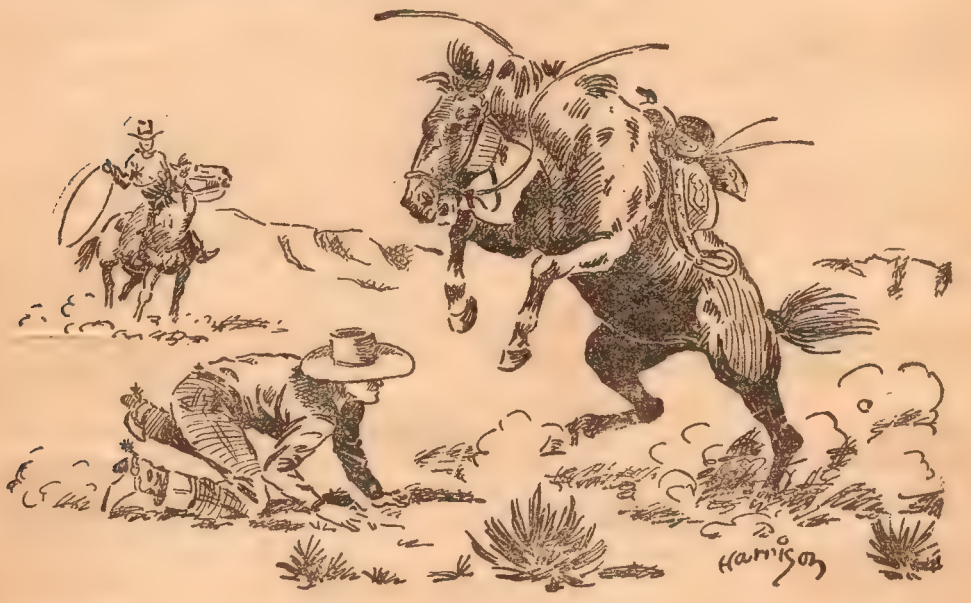
But already Shane had marked the tiny puff of smoke ballooning above the glistening barrel of a rifle in a clump of rocks three hundred yards ahead.

The pony lunged beneath him with hip-jolting violence to his sudden drive of spurs. Jones' voice died out in the pound of the big roan's hoofs as Shane hurled his bronc toward the ambusher's covert with whitened cheeks, teeth bared in a savage grin.

His racing palm smacked gun butt as the drygulcher broke from cover. The hammer rolled beneath his thumb. The loud reports churned up like thunder between the canyon walls. The ambusher had dropped to a knee,

and was sighting down his rifle. Pale flame stabbed from its muzzle. Lead splashing off his saddle horn jerked a grunt from Shane. Abruptly the blue roan came apart beneath him. Shane hurled himself from the saddle as the bronc went down in a crashing fall.

Shane lit rolling, gun still clenched in his hand. He was upon his feet in an instant, hardly a hundred yards separating himself from the drygulcher who now was firing with desperate haste, fearful of being caught in his own trap.



Lead ripped through Shane's vest, tugged at his hat, jarred his balance as a heel ripped loose from his left boot. Then he was sprinting forward awkwardly in the wake of the fleeing killer who was making for a horse that stood at a little distance on spraddled legs, its sides a smear of blood from the slash of cruel spurs.

As the man threw himself into the saddle Shane fired again, carefully, deliberate—grim malice in his heart.

The man's rising leg missed going over the saddle by inches. Shane could see the shudder that shook his slender frame. Then he was crumpling groundward, one foot still hooked in the stirrup. The horse was too spent to buck. It stood listless with down-hung head as though anchored by its motionless master. It did not even turn its eyes as Shane, followed by Jones, approached.

Shane released the fellow's foot from the stirrup. Jones came up cursing soulfully, the while he lamented his luck in not having had a hand in the fracas.

"Mex, eh?"

Shane nodded wearily. Reaction was on him as it always was after a killing. He felt a little sick at his stomach and strove to hide the fact behind a scowl. "Know him?"

Jones bent down for a closer look. Nothing squeamish about *his* stomach. "I've seen 'im. Name Pedro Abrilla—one of Jarson's gun-packers. Mean customer with a knife. I seen 'im carve a gent plumb scandalous the night before they run me out of their blarsted camp."

"Lume an' Lize—" Shane muttered thoughtfully. "This must be the fella that was ridin' the third hoss. An' if this here's the bronc, they sure must have been spreadin' scenery blurry-like. Looks plumb tuckered out."

"How yer figgerin' ter git places now that bloke did in yer 'oss?"

"We're pretty close to Silver King," Shane said, squinting down the canyon. "Guess we better ride double and lead the Mex's tuckered nag a spell. I reckon we better be gettin'—pronto. The trail is warmin' up."

IN the Red Hoss Saloon at Silver King, Jarson Lume was talking with its proprietor in a back room. Lize was with them, watching them sullenly while they talked.

"Aimin' to put her in the business, Jars?" Red Fogle asked, his lewd glance passing over the girl's figure. "She's a likely baggage an' oughta attract plenty trade."

Jarson Lume's voice, though well-modulated, was icy. "No. This lady is going to be my wife, Red."

"S'cuse *me!*" Fogle rose hastily and clawed at his cast-iron hat.

"You're a damn liar, Jarson Lume!" Lize Corbin's voice lashed vibrantly.

Fogle stared uncertainly from the girl's flushed cheeks to the sardonic smile on Lume's thin, bloodless lips. "Well," he said dubiously, "anything you folks say is all right with me. I ain't knowin' nothin' about it one way or the other. An', beggin' yore pardon, ma'am, I ain't givin' a damn one way or the other."

Lume chuckled silently. "You always was handy with the right answer, Red. Fix us up some grub. We're half starved. We've had a damn long ride. I left Pete Abrilla on the back trail a ways. Keep your eyes peeled for him. If anybody else comes round askin' for me, keep yore lip buttoned tight. An' let me know."

Fogle winked. "I get yuh, boss. How's tricks up Tortilla way?"

"I'm through with that camp," Lume said shortly, and changed the subject. "Any of the boys in town?"

"Three or four, I reckon. Rest went out on a little shindig las' night an' ain't got back yet. You wantin' to see 'em?"

"Not now—later, mebbe. Rattle your hocks now an' fetch that grub before I fall apart."

With a final admiring glance at Lize, Fogle went out and closed the door.

The minute he was out of sight Lize flared, "If you think you are goin' to keep me in this place, you're plumb crazy as hell!"

Lume grinned wolfishly. "Shucks," he sneered, "you better make up your mind to marry me an' do it quick. When Jarson Lume makes up his mind to do a thing, he does it! Think it over, Lize."

Scorn and loathing were intermingled in Lize Corbin's stormy glance. "I'll never marry you—I'd kill myself first!"

"You ain't goin' to get no chance," Lume chuckled. "I ain't lettin' you out of my sight till the knot's been tied."

"You—you beast!"

"Better save them endearin' terms till after we get hitched up," he smirked.

After they had eaten Lume locked Lize securely in an upstairs room from which he had assured himself there could be no escape. He came downstairs again and drew Red Fogle to one side, where it would be impossible for other customers to overhear.

"Red—" he studied Fogle's face intently—"d'you know a man called 'Whisk' Lipari?"

"Short, stocky, black-faced hombre?"

Lume nodded.

"I know him well enough," Fogle admitted cautiously. "What about him?"

"Know if he's in town?"

Fogle considered. "I reckon he is," he finally said, pursing his heavy lips.

"Where can I find him?"

Fogle's eyebrows arched a trifle, then drew down in a beetling scowl. "What kind of a deal you got in mind?"

"There are times," Lume pointed out significantly, "when ignorance is

sure the height of bliss, Red. This here is one of those times."

Lights glinted dully in the resort-keeper's glance. He drummed upon the bar with nervous fingers, took a deep breath and let it slowly out.

"Well," he said, as though washing his hands of the business, "I reckon you know what you're doin', Jars. If you was to wander over to the Gold Gun your curiosity might get satisfied." With the words he turned his broad back and strolled huffily away.

Jarson Lume grinned sardonically, pulled his hat rakishly down across one eye and left the place.

OUTSIDE the afternoon sun sent its brassy rays down slantwise across the town, sending the elongated, distorted shadows of its flimsy buildings flat and black across the dust-choked road. Heat waves lay in stifling strata above the blistering boards of its plank walks, above the sand-scoured and sun-grayed wooden awnings. Long shadows bathed the distant mountainsides in a mantle of somber purple.

Jarson Lume stood before the Red Hoss and let his veiled glance rove the deserted street. It came to a final rest on an establishment obliquely across the way. His lips curled as he looked down at the bottlelike sheen with which he had, but a few short minutes ago, managed to imbue his boots. With a shrug, then, he strode out across the squalid dust.

When he stepped inside the Gold Gun's swinging doors he swiftly got his back against a dirty wall and, from between slitted lids, sent a searching glance stabbing through the smoky half-light.

There had been laughter in the place, but it had quieted at his entrance. Jarson Lume was tempted to press the white kerchief, peeping from the breast pocket of his black frock coat, to his nose as he let his glance play over the motley group of sweating humanity that was ranged along the bar. But he repressed the impulse.

A man in a pinto vest and frazzled corduroy trousers tucked into cowhide boots detached himself from his unsavory companions and, with a significant jerk of expressive eyes, moved toward a rear door. Lume followed.

He found himself in a bare back room whose only furnishings were a rough table, two chairs, and great quantities of dust. The man in the pinto vest flashed Lume an intent, appraising glance, then his yellow eyes slid away. He jerked a nod of greeting. "Long time no see."

"How you doin', Lipari? Wallowin' in dinero?"

Lipari grinned—a twisted grimace which did nothing to enhance his ugly looks. "What's on yore mind?"

"I got a chore for you. There's two thousand in it."

The yellow eyes did not even blink, but regarded Lume craftily. "Who you got it in for now?"

"I'm askin' the questions," Lume said curtly. "Do you figure you can use the dinero?"

"Did you ever know me when I couldn't?" Lipari countered with a grin.

"Not the point. D'you want it, or shall I pack it some place else?"

"I'd have to know what mark you was figgerin' to remove. I ain't the man to buy any gent's pig in a poke."

Lume nodded. "I'll spread my cards on the table. Me an' a friend is takin' a little pasear across the country. Some one's on my back-trail. I want 'em stopped—right here. An' permanent."

"Who?"

"You're gettin' damn partic'lar in your ol' age," Lume snapped coldly.

"I'm findin' that it pays to," was Lipari's blunt comeback. "Who's trailin' you? Come clean, Jars, or I'm passin' up the pot."

"Well, it's no one you know. Fella called Sudden Shane, an' some two-bit gunslick he's picked up."

"Shows you don't know ever'thing, Jars. I reckon you're talkin' about a gent called S. G. Shane. Right?"

Lume was surprised at the other's knowledge, but he kept the fact to himself. With expressionless countenance he grunted, "I've heard he gives that name."

"Well, this little chore will cost you real money, mister. That guy's hell on wheels, an' I've got no hankerin' to be committin' suicide. This chore, Jars, will cost you five thousand or the deal's off."

"It's off, then, far as I'm concerned," Lume said, and started for the door.

CHAPTER XVI

A Sidewinder's Den

BUT he did not leave immediately. He halted with his hand on the knob and looked back across his shoulder. Whisk Lipari had not changed his position by an inch. He sat sprawled across one of the chairs, thumbs hooked in his suspenders, a wolfish grin on his twisted lips.

"Oh—yeah?" he said, and laughed. It curdled the silence wickedly and snapped a dark flash into Jarson Lume's white cheeks.

Lume's husky tones grew ugly. "Have a care, Lipari. You ain't so damned valu'ble to me, you know. There's been other guys that *thought* they were."

"Meanin' where are they now, eh?" Lipari sneered. "I reckon I'll get along—with or without your help."

"I wasn't talkin' about help, my friend."

"Oh." Lights shifted in Lipari's yellow orbs. He drew the left down in an exaggerated wink. "Well, I can get along with or without your damned enmity, too! I ain't been no hired gun all my life, mister. I've been a lot of things you'll never be—not even if you corner all the gold an' copper mines in this country! Go laff that off."

Lume's scowl ironed out. "All right. Five thousand, then. I'll pay you when the job is done."

"Like hell!" sneered Lipari. "You'll pay me now, or get yourself some other sucker. This Shane pilgrim ain't what I'd call a tame gorilla. The guy that downs him is gonna earn what he gets. An' if I'm the guy, I'll do my collectin' in advance. You wouldn't be the first sidewinder that tried to pull a sandy."

Lume's bloodless face grew pinched and venomous. "Are you tryin' to—"

"Stow it," Lipari growled. "Pay up or shut up!"

Hate glowed in Lume's cold eyes. "Lipari," he wrenched out explosively, "you're a dirty damned blood-suckin' leech!"

Lipari's chuckle shrank to a satanic grin. "Blow off all the steam you've a mind to." His drawling voice was contemptuous. "But if you ain't figgerin' to pay, you might as well pull your picket pin now an' drift. Five thousand's my price—no more nor less. You gonna pay, or ain't you?"

Lume's face was bloated poisonously; his cheeks trembled, so vicious was his wrath. His hand half reached inside his coat so that, for a moment, it seemed he meditated violence. With a sullen oath he drew back the hand, thrusting it instead into the side pocket of his coat and brought it immediately forth with a thick roll of bills.

"You know," said Lipari sardonically, "a fast draw will beat four aces all of a twitter." And he added: "You've been packin' that hideout gun so long you're beginnin' to stand sideways."

Lume ignored the remark and started to unroll the bills.

"You must be doin' real well, Jars," said Lipari a moment later, eyeing the currency. "That roll's big as a wagon hub. You act damn tight for

a fella that's fair wallowin' in velvet."

Lume paid no attention but went on counting out the bills. When the pile on the table before Lipari represented five thousand dollars he put the rest —which had not been noticeably diminished—back in his pocket. "See that you do this job right, or I'll be back for an accountin'," he gruffed, and once more started for the door.

As he reached it Lipari's voice came mockingly: "When you get outside, tell Nogales to come in—I got a job for him."

The door slammed behind Lume viciously.

WHEN Jarson Lume stepped into the street, the sun had dropped from sight behind the towering peaks. Long shadows dyed the mountains' flanks with dusk while the summits stood out like crags of liquid gold. But Lume had no eyes for beauty in that form. He crossed the dusty road with determined strides, his face thrust grimly forward, and entered the lamplit interior of the Red Hoss Saloon.

Red Fogle followed him to the rear room where they had sat less than two hours before with Lize.

Lume came at once to the point. "Fogle, you got a man in your string, or a couple of men, who are handy with their smoke-poles and would be glad to earn a bit of cash?"

Fogle's beetling brows went up. "I thought you was figurin' on dealin' with Lipari?"

"You ain't bein' paid to think," Lume said icily. "Have you got the men or not?"

"Yeah, I got a coupla boys that ain't no slouches when it comes to throwin' lead," he admitted interestedly. "What's up?"

"There's a couple of would-be gunslicks trailin' me," Lume confided, "that I want rubbed out as soon's they show. I aim to be gone before then, but whether I am or not has nothing to do with this deal. Now listen," he added, and proceeded to describe Shane and his companion. How he knew that Jones was with Shane remains a mystery, but he had many ways of finding out the things he took an interest in.

"This job," he concluded gruffly, "pays well—a thousan' bucks apiece. I'm leavin' the cash with you." He counted it out and put in in the other's hand. "Now clear out—I want to do some thinkin'."

But when Fogle had closed the door behind him, Lume's words were certainly belied by his subsequent actions. He removed the gun from the shoulder holster beneath his coat, took the cartridges from its cylinder and replaced them with others taken from his pocket. Then he spun the cylinder critically. Placing the snub-nosed .38 inside his coat pocket he blew out the lamp and left by the rear door, moving with catlike, noiseless steps.

His way took him down a string of gloomy alleys whose tin-can-littered ground gave off no sign of human presence as he advanced, angling always closer to the street. He at last emerged upon it, but only after carefully scrutinizing the surrounding shadows to be sure that he was not the object of some loiterer's attention.

Like a shadow he flitted across the dusty road, gained the far side without encounter and slunk softly into the gloom-choked space between two buildings. One of these was the Gold Gun. He rounded it, pausing a moment at its rear to make certain he was not observed. Slowly, then, every sinuous nerve strung taut, he advanced on the single window.

At first he thought the room must be deserted, but suddenly realized as he neared it that the window was draped with a heavy blanket. It had not been half an hour before when in that room he had propositioned Whisk Lipari. If Lipari was in there now—

With his right hand tensely gripping the snub-nosed .38 inside his pocket, Lume's left hand found the door unlocked and thrust it open. He could see, almost instantly, the broad squat form of Lipari seated at the

table. The money Lume had given him was still piled there before him and it came to Lume that Lipari had been gloating over it.

A flush of rage flamed Lume's cold cheeks; devil's temper lit his eyes.

"Lipari," he whispered hoarsely. And as Lipari whirled, flame bit from the pocket of Lume's black coat. A malicious laugh escaped him as Lipari, eyes bulging, hands clutching at his chest, sagged forward across the table's top. With one swift motion Lume scooped the currency from the table and, stepping back across the threshold, softly closed the door.

TWENTY minutes later Jarson Lume stepped once again inside the swinging doors of Fogle's Red Hoss Saloon. He stepped inside and stopped abruptly, gaze widening then narrowing to regard the half crouched man across the room with gleaming eyes that were hard as flint.

"Well," he purred smoothly into the vibrant silence, "I hadn't expected you so soon—" and was checked by the other's malignant sneer.

"No, you bet you wasn't, you double-crossin', back-bitin' woman-stealin' whelp!" Stone Latham's voice, like the man himself, was coiled like trigger steel. "Where's the gal?"

"The gal?" said Lume in a startled voice. "What the hell are you talkin' about?"

"Lize Corbin, damn yore soul to hell! *Where is she?* Speak, you white-faced coyote, before I lead yore guts!"

"She asked me to take her out of the country," Lume said calmly. Only the tiny fires in his lambent eyes betrayed the lashing anger that tore at him, an anger born of hatred and jealousy of the man before him.

"She didn't say why she wanted to leave," he went on, "except that she found the people hateful, slanderous an' vile—I guess she was thinkin' of you when she said the last." There was a sneer in the grin he turned on Latham.

Latham scowled red-eyed and a spot of white appeared in either cheek. His tall, gaunt form slowly straightened. There was a bold truculence in his glance, and his lips held a cynical curve.

"You're a slick hombre, Jars, taken by an' large. Slick as a sidewinder's belly," he said. "But you're not foolin' me one damn minute longer. Where's Lize Corbin? I'm not figurin' to ask again."

"That's for you to find out." Lume's husky voice with its taunting timbre worked on Latham as a red rag appears to work upon a bull.

With a strangled sob Stone Latham, the ever cautious, clawed wildly for his gun.

From the burned right-hand pocket of Lume's black coat, a streak of flame lanced lividly. Stone Latham's limbs abruptly suspended all lethal motion and a great amazement, not unmixed with fear, distorted his paling face. He took one forward step and staggered. Then the hinges of his knees let go and dropped him in a grotesque heap.

Jarson Lume's cold glance flashed round from face to face. Men quailed back before the message in his blazing eyes. Lume's lips twisted in a contemptuous sneer. "Well, any of you pelicans aimin' to take up where he left off?"

The silence in the Red Hoss bar remained unbroken.

CHAPTER XVII

Hot Lead for Coyotes

"WOULDN'T it p'r'aps be better," Jones asked hesitantly, "if we waited till after dark to go into this bloody Silver King? 'Oo knows wot we might be bargin' inter if we goes rompsin' in there now? Blimey, it fair throws me ter the goose-pimples jest ter be thinkin' of it!"

Shane regarded him suspiciously; abruptly he chuckled. "Yeah, I'm allowin' you look scared as hell," he said. "But I reckon you are right, at that. We'd be askin' for it if we was to go sashayin' into Silver in broad daylight. Reckon I'm gettin' plumb careless." He squinted out across the yellow earth. "Reckon we better wait till night. Wee hours are figgered best for takin' a enemy unawares."

He stepped from the blown horse's saddle. Jones, too, swung down.

Jones said, "Any'ow, yer wouldn't 'a' got far on that bone rack till 'e 'ad a spot o' rest. That Mex musta pushed 'im cruel 'ard."

Shane nodded. "I reckon." He looked at the dead man's horse with a critical eye. It had shown neither curiosity nor interest at Shane's dismounting. It showed none now, but stood there on spraddled legs, head down, breathing heavily. Sweat trickled from its belly.

Jones squinted to where the sun was sinking from the darkening sky. Its descent was washing the towering canyon walls with gold and in their crevices creating cobalt shadows. "I got a yearnin' void wot's pinin' ter be filled," he said, drawing up the slack in his belt. "Any of that grub left?"

"Nope—nary a crumb," Shane answered, dry of voice. He seemed to have relapsed into his customary urbanity again. His face expressed once more the placid patience of one to whom time holds no import. And yet there was that air, that arresting air of confident efficiency about him, an atmosphere of unhurried capability. There was a cool serenity about his smoky eyes that told of a man at peace with his conscience. If he was still worried about the fate of Lize Corbin, one would never have guessed it from his features.

Jones watched him roll a cigarette with one deft twirl of his fingers—no hesitancy there, no tremble. Jones marveled at his composure, but said nothing, content to leave his thoughts unaired.

Shane unsaddled the Mexican's horse and put him on a rope. Stretching his own long frame Jones proceeded to do likewise. Then, like Shane, he sat down on his boot heels and devoted his time to smoking gravely while the thickening shadows of dusk gathered softly in the canyon.

IT was nearing two on the following morning when they approached Silver King, and was so dark—there being no moon—that Shane and his mount were but a shadowy blur three lengths ahead. Jones' lips quirked humorously. A few minutes now and they would know what they would know, he told himself.

The labored breathing of the horses reached out before their nostrils, disturbing the misty murk. Jones had been startled more than once by the eerie shadows of tall sahuaros and yellow-stalked sotol shoving up at them out of the gloom, and upon one occasion had even chagrined to find his gun in hand. He had put it covertly away while watching Shane's broad back with a sense of shame that he had been so callow. In his actions, that is to say. For, personally, he was far from callow, though about his character there did lurk a certain naive charm of which he was totally unconscious. He would very likely have shot any man so reckless as to tell him.

Jones marveled much at Shane's display of horsemanship. He had observed how the slightest flexure of Shane's fingers on the reins held the instant power to stop the dead Mexican's *caballo*. He recalled how half an hour ago when riding through the desolate waste of sand a coyote's howl had almost spooked his own mount, and how a mere touch of Shane's bare hand had sufficed to quiet him.

The silence of this vast land seemed absolute. In his soul Jones felt the stillness of this desolate Arizona to be a sinister thing—a thing of menace, dangerous and creeping, a thing that mocked and followed one about with saturnine leer. Only Shane seemed

unaffected. Only the creak of saddle leather, the occasional jingle of spurs and the muffled plopping of the horses' hoofs disturbed the monstrous hush.

All this country appeared to be waiting, Jones thought bodingly. Mystery crouched upon its mountain crags; stark threat scowled hotly from its deserts. Even the vegetation was equipped with stinging spikes and there was a grim formidability about its animal life. It was a land whose paramount law was survival of the fittest—a hell where weaklings shriveled and died.

Though the hour was late they did not find Silver King completely dark. Three dives were open, throwing hurdles of yellow light across the dusty road. They filled the night around with confusion, noise and raucous laughter. As he listened to the brassy notes of a decrepit piano and a dance hall girl's high treble wail, Jones thought more kindly of the desert's silence and would have welcomed it for a space.

Shane led the way to the largest establishment where they swung down and tethered their mounts to a spot Shane chose near the end of the hitching rail. Then, loosening his gun in its holster, Shane said quietly, "Let's go," and led the way through the swinging doors.

The place was far from crowded. Neither was it deserted. Several men bellied the crude plank bar that marked off its farther end. There were several gambling layouts being desultorily patronized and a tiny bit of cleared floor about the tin-panny piano where gentlemen might sling a

wicked hoof with the percentage girls who draped their slinky forms about the room.

Jones, having noted the misspelled sign as they were entering, knew this dive for the Red Hoss Saloon of one R. Fogle, proprietor.

He kept his glance divided between Fogle's customers and Shane, alert and wary for his cue. Shane seemed perfectly at ease as he stood there squinting complacently through the smoke of his cigarette, thumbs hooked in his cartridge belt, his form in a hip-slot slouch.

No one seemed to be paying them any great attention, he thought. But he watched suspiciously, none the less, three hombres who were standing with heads together whispering, halfway down the bar. One, a square-bodied, square-faced towhead with popping blue eyes and a cracklike mouth amid a maze of whiskers, seemed to be talking most of the time and he waved his hands emphatically to illustrate his argument.

Jones' lid closed down till only slits of his eyes were visible as he stared more closely at the trio. There was something wrong with that picture, he told himself. What it was he could not so easily define, but there was something.

He looked at Shane. Shane appeared to pay the men no notice, yet as one of them abruptly left his companions and swung his steps in their direction, Jones saw Shane wheel slightly with a deep drag on his cigarette.

It was the square-faced towhead who approached. He stopped a few feet off and said to Shane, "Ain't yore name Shane?"

Jones saw a red-haired man with heavy lips edging toward them from behind the gambling tables. He unostentatiously dropped his right hand to let it rest upon his gun as Shane said:

"Do I know you, friend? Your face don't seem uncommon familiar. Perhaps you've made a mistake," he added softly.

"Yo're Shane, ain't yuh?" the towhead persisted.

"What gives you that idea?"

"Why, yuh matches the desc—" he bit his words off short, cheeks darkening, popping eyes sinking dangerously inward. "Ne'mind. All I wanta know is, are yuh the gent called S. G. Shane?"

The man's companions, and the redhead still edging closer, appeared to be listening with strained attention, as though something vital might hang upon Shane's acceptance of the name. Jones felt a cold chill of warning along his spine. His hand closed more firmly about the butt of his holstered gun as he waited for Shane's reply.

SHANE'S slow glance swept keenly over those others, and over the onlookers who had stopped all other business to watch the towhead and his companions as though fascinated. A chill seemed to have descended on the Red Hoss Saloon that was very different from its wonted atmosphere. Shane must have detected this for Jones observed the smoky hue of his eyes grow darker, dangerous. Tiny fires coalesced within their depths.

Shane seemed to maintain an attitude of aloof and suspended judgment.

"Are you Shane, or ain't yuh?" the towhead rasped with an oath.

The calm tranquillity of Sudden's glance was maddening; even Jones could feel the tightening tension which had almost reached the snapping point. The towhead's cheeks flamed red.

Shane said with leisured drawl, "Why, yes, my name is Shane, pardner. Were you aimin' to give me a reception—you and these other gents with the nervous feet?"

The towhead watched Shane with a saturnine grin. "Reception's right!" he jeered. "An' I'm figurin' to run it. I'm figurin' to run you outa town on a rail, with a nice coat of tar an' feathers, Mister Gunman Shane!"

"Really?" Shane chuckled.

"Yo're damn' right—really!"

"What for?" Shane asked. Then he added: "How did you get elected for the job?"

"I'm marshal here," the towhead snarled, hand spreading clawlike above his holstered pistol. "You git outa this town pronto or you'll git put out plenty rough."

Shane's white teeth gleamed behind his parted lips. "I reckon I ain't never been put out of no place yet. An' I'm allowin' I don't expect I ever will. So you can get on with your tar-an'-featherin' an' your rail-ridin' any time you've a mind to. Go ahead, fella."

The towhead seemed a trifle taken aback by this unexpected situation. Jones saw his eyes flash hurriedly to where the redhead stood and turned his own glance in that direction just in time to catch the redhead's nod.

Shane's voice lashed out with a truculent snap: "Go on, hombre! Ain't no one settin' on your shirt-tail! Let loose your howlin' wolf!" And with the words, Jones saw Shane's gun snap out and stop tensely with its muzzle in the folds of the towhead's quivering stomach. The towhead's hands shot ceilingward with comical alacrity.

Shane grinned. "That's better," he drawled. "So you scorpions were figurin' to cold-deck Sudden Shane. My, my! Your audacity astounds me. Tell your friends, Whitey, to back up against the bar. They better have their paws up where I can look 'em over without strainin' my eyes, too. I've got a itchy trigger-finger an' when my eyes start hurtin' I'm right apt to have a convulsion in that finger. That—" his voice grew jeering—"would be awful bad for you."

Jones grinned as the towhead's friends began reluctantly retreating toward the bar. Shane certainly had a way with him, he felt. But Shane had ought to make those hombres part with their guns, he thought. First thing a—

"Look out, boss!" he yelled frantically. "This is it!"

From the tail of his eyes Jones had seen the redhead's hand flash downward. Now it was coming up, gun-weighted, and there was a glint of triumphant satisfaction in the fellow's red-rimmed eyes.

Jones palmed his gun in a lightning motion even as Shane dropped below the other's shot. Came the rasp of steel on leather as Shane's long gun came out, while Shane with a roaring oath threw his body backward even as its muzzle cleared the holster and spat.

Belatedly the towhead's hand dived hipward. But it never reached his gun. Shane's shot took him in the shoulder, hurled him backward, smashed him against the bar.

Jones noted this subconsciously even as he slammed a shot at Fogle—missed, and fired again. Fogle staggered back beneath the bullet's shock but held his feet, striving valiantly to bring his gun to bear again. But in vain. Jones fired again and saw the redhead topple.

Then came Shane's voice, overriding the tumult of reverberating echoes that churned the narrow space: "The door—quick!"

EVEN with the words Shane began backing toward it, the gun in his hand weaving from left to right, holding the snarling crowd momentarily in check. One man dared dart a hand to waist. Shane slammed in a shot from the hip that knocked him sprawling across a poker table, carrying it, cards, chips, white money and a bottle of rotgut to the floor in a splintering crash.

The hands of the white-faced, cowed but sullen crowd reached upward with renewed zest.

Jones had reached the door. "Out quick!" came Shane's command. "I'll follow."

Jones backed out, his gun too held level at the hip; backed out and turned to see if the way was clear.

All he saw was a livid burst of flame that split before his eyes. The smash-

ing rip of lead hurled him back against the doors where with outspread arms he hung poised for a fleeting instant. Then the muscles of his body loosened, spilled him backward across the floor at the feet of Shane. He was dead before he struck.

Shane's lips parted in a savage snarl that was like the cry of some wounded animal. That was all; he did not curse. But a spinning leap took him through the doors with flaming gun. He grinned with ghastly mirthlessness as his bullets drove Jones' killer to his knees in the dusty road. He laughed at the bloody sob in the man's clogged voice. Then he caught the pound of charging boots behind him.

With a sidewise leap he scooped from the dust the killer's fallen gun and whirled. He slid his own emptied weapon back in leather, as the swinging doors bulged open to the headlong impact of the towhead's charging friends.

His lips curled back in a vicious snarl as he straightened to a crouch, eyes slitted, fiercely blazing. "So it's fight you want?" he lashed. "Well, come an' get it!"

With a cold fury almost unbelievable Shane drove his shots deliberately into that huddle of charging, cursing men. Gun thunder rose in huge crescendo, slamming heavily against the dark shadows of buildings across the street. The smashing rip of lead dropped the milling horde like quail.

Shouts, screams, curses intermingled in a tangled bedlam with the raucous bark of Colts. Through the red confusion some of the outlaws pistoled wildly. But their aim was mad, their trigger-fingers shaking. Shane's deadly aim demoralized their purpose. And suddenly, knowing their cause a lost one, those who could turned tail.

The thing was over as swiftly as it started. Against the yellow bar of lamplight streaming out beneath the doors, forms sprawled in crumpled limpness made grotesque, huddled blotches.

White-cheeked and sick from the terrible debacle Shane lurched blindly down the steps toward saddle horses, groaning as his clumsy fingers jammed fresh cartridges in his empty weapons.

Only vaguely was he aware of the disturbed ant heap Silver King had now become. He hardly noticed the lights that were suddenly flaring in darkened windows, the half-clad men emerging hurriedly from false-fronted dwellings. His mind was filled with the image of Bless Jones—the lanky Britisher who never again would ride and laugh and curse and follow his lead on tortuous trails in dead of night. Jones, who had gone down fighting to the last.

CHAPTER XVIII

Sinister Saddles

TO the girl who rode with wrists tied around her back and legs lashed by their ankles beneath her horse's belly alongside Jarson Lume through the brightening light of dawn, it seemed that Fate was a cruel and bitter thing: that life was hard and the world an empty laugh of cold indifference. Nothing but a series of griefs and hardships, of struggles and forlorn hopes marked the back-trail through her short span of years. Ahead loomed a seared and blistered desert of shattered dreams. For the first time in months her shoulders sagged.

She somberly studied Lume's broad back where he rode a few paces in the lead. Every line and curve of that black frock coat was hateful. Even the slant of his wide-brimmed, flat-crowned hat seemed to mock and jeer at her, seemed to sneer with cold complacency at her fate. He did not even

look around; he knew that she would follow, that she dared not turn her horse aside. Worse—she was forced to admit that he was right.

To leave this trail they followed, tied like a steer for slaughter, must surely spell disaster, for this was a wild and desolate country through which they traveled. A country of few and scattered ranches; a land where one might ride for hours without sighting a single moving creature.

No, she dared not try to elude him, not here. To do so here meant death of thirst, of exposure; a death so tortured she dared not contemplate it even. But surely, she reasoned listlessly, death of contact with the desert was better by far than marrying Lume.

Jarson Lume had gloatingly told her not half an hour ago that Shane was on their trail. He had told her, grinning wickedly, that he had aroused a reception committee to greet Shane at Silver King—a committee whose business it was to see that he got no farther. He had pointed out that since she now could hold no hope of getting away, she might as well behave.

She had heaped abuse upon him with scorn and loathing, vowing she'd have nothing to do with him were he the last man, even, on earth. But Lume had only grinned his taunting grin.

Sunrise came to light the world, to gild this desolate wilderness through which they rode with the rainbow colors of hope and promise. But Lize Corbin's lips twisted bitterly as she watched through haggard eyes. Life held no longer any promise worth redeeming, and as for hope—well, hope was dead.

"When we get to Globe," Lume's voice came chuckling back, "you'll have your final chance to get hitched up. You better make up your mind before we get there, too, 'cause I ain't figurin' to linger none. Not that there's hurry now," he added quickly. "But I'm some anxious to get on to Bylas—I got a deal on there."

Lize Corbin held a scornful silence. Why give the beast the satisfaction of an answer?

THEY rode a spell in silence. Then Lize thought she saw a way of getting under his skin as he was so constantly getting under hers. She believed she knew a way of taking that sneering grin from his mouth—for a time, at least.

"You know," she said, as though thoughtfully, "you have been leavin' Stone Latham out of your figgerin'. He ain't goin' to like this business at all."

"What business?"

"This runnin' away with me. Stone Latham's a man to nurse a grudge an'—"

Lume's hateful laugh came floating back to interrupt her. "No need for you to get all lathered up pinnin' any hopes on *him.*"

"What do you mean?" Lize asked, a cold chill of premonition chasing the color from her cheeks. She had nothing but hate and loathing for Latham; but of the two she feared Jarson Lume the most—Jarson Lume who always got his way. "What do you mean about pinnin' any hopes on him?"

"He ain't in no position to be takin' up my trail right now." Lume's husky chuckle was sinister. "Him an' me has had a understandin'."

"Understandin'?"

"Yeah. He ain't got no objections to you hitchin' up with me. Said he didn't give a damn who you hitched up with. Now—" his voice grew suave and soothing—"you ought to be right glad to marry a man as big as me. I'm one of the biggest men in this country. I'm goin' to be bigger, too. I'm figurin' to settle down an' quit my hell-bendin' ways. I want a home, a wife—"

"What you want, you lyin' polecat, is the information you're figgerin' Dry Camp passed on to me after some of your bushwhackers give him a dose of lead-poisonin'!"

"Now see here," Lume growled, stopping his horse and hers, too, with a hand upon the cheek-strap. "I've had enough of your tantrums. An' I've had all I want of your damned insinuations. You better make up your mind to side me; I'm figurin' on goin' places. Hell, nothin's too big for me to get, gal! I got property—rich property—all over this damn state. Look—" he dropped his voice confidentially—"I got my eye on the governor's seat right now."

"I don't give a durn if you got your eye on the President's seat—you ain't goin' to get me! Why," Lize cried with unutterable scorn, "I'd kill myself first!"

Lume chuckled. "Yeah? Well, I'll see that you don't get no chance, then. What you figurin' to save yourself for, gal? Not Latham, sure? An' Shane is goin' to get himself rubbed out real quick—may be rubbed out now, I shouldn't wonder. Don't be a fool. I can give you anything you want, all the things you never had—good clothes, jewelry, position. Cripes, you stick with me, Lize, an' I'll take you places."

"Yeah, I bet you will." Her voice was drily sarcastic. "Jail, prob'ly, or the owl-hoot trail!"

Lume snorted. "There ain't no man in the country big enough to shove Jarson Lume in jail! Act your age, gal. I got this country sewed up. I can control the courts; I'm bossin' the minin' camps where most of the dinero is; I own some of the biggest ranches an' I've got a interest in them I don't own outright. What the hell more could you ask?"

"All that is so, I reckon," Lize said wearily. "But I'm not wantin' you, an' you're not gettin' me. So make up your mind to it."

"I ain't, eh?" Lume's husky tones turned ugly. "We'll see about that!"

With a swift cruel yank he jerked her toward him, one sinewy arm about her shoulders effectually preventing her from getting free of him. Bound as she was at wrist and ankle, her struggles were so futile as to draw a mocking grin to Lume's bloodless, clean-shaven face. "Spirit," he purred, "is what I like in my string."

TWO hours had passed since Sudden Shane had left the noisy turbulence of Silver King behind. It was light now, and although he had closely scanned his back-trail many times since dawn he had seen no sign of pursuit. He looked again, half turning in his saddle. But the rugged terrain behind loomed empty and desolate as

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ever. With a breath of relief he swung his eyes to the front, to the hoofprints of the pair of horses he had followed since the vanishing of darkness had permitted him to scan the trail.

One, he could see by the sign, was a paddler, and faster than its companion. The other was a "coon-footed" bronc of low pasterns. Neither was hurrying now, and Shane guessed that Lume had slowed the pace to conserve their endurance.

"Must be figurin' to cover a heap of territory," Shane opined. "I shouldn't wonder but what Jarson's aimin' to cut his stick."

His lips pressed tightly together at the thought, and the muscles bunched along his jaw. "Figurin' to take Lize Corbin clear out of the country."

The horse on which Shane had departed from Silver King was a good one. And lucky that it was, he reflected grimly, for there were not apt to be many places on the trail Lume was traveling where remounts could be secured. Lume was deliberately avoiding all common lanes of travel, sticking to the rough country, the desert wastes and rock-choked canyons where he would not be apt to encounter other riders who might get curious about the girl.

Shane's horse was a short-coupled blue roan, probably weighing a good eleven hundred pounds; an animal promising a deal more endurance than speed, but one that, properly handled, could cover ground for days. And Shane was of the opinion that the chase might well last that long unless some unforeseen circumstance intervened.

This horse of his, he reasoned, had likely belonged to one of those gunfighters he and Jones had encountered

in the saloon of the Red Hoss. The saddle was ornately carved and heavily embossed with silver; a kak of the rimfire type.

He was well armed, having besides a rifle, that extra pistol he had snatched from the dust where Jones' killer had fallen. The loops of his belt had provided, however, barely sufficient cartridges to fill them. Should he shoot these out he would have to discard the belt guns and take to the rifle, a more awkward weapon in the event of close-range work.

Shane drove the blue roan forward now, one eye alert upon the trail, the other keen for possible ambush. Forward, ever forward, they went plunging into the rush and slap of the searing wind that was like a draught from hell's furnace. A half hour slid by with only the whistling wind, the creak of leather and pounding hoofs to tell that they were not within a vacuum. Shane might have thought they rode a treadmill but for the dizzy blur of chaparral, rocks, stunted oak and pig-locust reeling constantly by.

Occasionally Shane would halt the blue roan's progress long enough to get down and closely study the tracks left by the horses of Lume and Lize. He stopped now for that purpose and, as he squatted there on his boot-heels beside the shaley trail, a slow sardonic grin pulled at his lips. He was getting close; these tracks showed sudden hurry, proving that somehow Lume had sighted him and knew his Nemesis was drawing near!

Shane climbed back into the saddle with renewed confidence and hope. He now most definitely had Jarson Lume on the run. The man's actions, as shown by the hoofprints, proved it!

"He'd better slope!" Shane muttered grimly. "'Cause I'm allowin' when I catch up with him, the reckonin' he's been pilin' up these last weeks since I been in this country is goin' to be settled plumb permanent."

But if Jarson Lume had seen him and was, indeed, attempting flight through fear and desperation, he was putting his knowledge of the country to good use. The long afternoon wore slowly by and yet, when evening came, Shane still had failed to sight him.

CHAPTER XIX

Sunrise Trail

IT was dusk when Sudden Shane, tight of lip and grim of eye, rode into the copper town of Globe. Lights were beginning to come on in its houses, flinging slender lances, broad bars and glowing pools of golden radiance across the shadowed dirt of its broad main street.

Shane, after his long ride and weary hours in the saddle, was feeling pretty ganted as he swung stiffly from the blue roan before the hitchrack fronting the Copper City Grub Emporium. Tying the roan loosely to the rail, he went inside cuffing the alkali grit from his clothing.

The restaurant was practically deserted at this hour. Shane saw no one at the counter but a whiskered old miner who lolled on his elbows above his emptied plate. The light in his faded eyes showed Shane his mind was far away; perhaps with the folks who, when setting out to make his fortune years agone, he'd left behind.

Shane took a stool at the counter's other end, from which position he could watch the door and any passers along the walk outside, who would be illuminated by the light streaming from the Emporium.

While his supper was being cooked in a back room Shane sat moodily with his restless thoughts. Though he realized he must be pressing close to Lume, he felt anxious none the less about Lize Corbin. He could imagine well the nightmare this experience must be proving to her. Conjecture along these

unpleasant lines brought out cold sweat upon his forehead.

When his food was placed before him he ate hurriedly, washing it down with cups of scalding coffee. He paid no attention to the plump and handsome waitress who was palpably willing to flirt. Indeed, he seemed not to even sense her presence.

His thoughts were still with Lize and his eyes, for the most part, remained focused on the door. He did not anticipate sighting any acquaintance here, but the turmoil of his border years had taught him caution, the value of being ever on his guard against surprise.

As he ate he listened to the occasional snatches of conversation which drifted in from the night outside. The plank sidewalk rumbled hollowly to the oft uneven tread of booted feet as the citizens of Globe, their suppers eaten and their after-supper chores completed, set out to spend their loose change in such resorts as catered to their tastes. Lucky, carefree hombres.

AND then suddenly Shane's lean wiry form went tense. His cheeks went gray beneath their bronze as his eyes narrowed intently on the broad, black-frocked back of a tall man passing the door.

In an instant he was off his stool. Slipping a handful of change on the counter, he cat-footed swiftly to the door, passed through and onto the busy walk outside.

By the lights of stores and other business places he could see the tall man threading his way through the townsmen up ahead. He followed grimly, his narrowed eyes never leaving that black-frocked back.

So intent was he upon that man ahead that he jostled a red-shirted miner unintentionally off the walk. The fellow swore and Shane, never taking his glance from his quarry, apologized—but kept on moving.

A heavy hand caught him by the shoulder, whirled him round with a lurid oath. "Push me into that dust, will ye? By hell, I'll teach ye ter watch where ye're goin'!

"No offense, p a r d n e r," Shane grinned, and would have started on. But the miner would not have it so. Too much drink had made him ugly. He swung a haymaker at Shane's jaw which only missed by inches.

Shane swore and brought an angry right fist up from his bootstraps. It took the Cousin Jack glancingly upon his Adam's apple and thudded to a jarring stop beneath his stubbled chin. Without a sound of remonstrance the miner went over backwards, struck heavily on the walk. A flashing glance of Shane's keen eyes showed him other miners crowding up.

S h a n e squared off impatiently. "Listen, h o m b r e s—that gent got bumped off this walk by mistake. I was lookin' at someone else an' didn't see him. I apologized, but he got tough."

"Aah, you damn punchers think you own the world!" sneered another red-shirted fellow. "C'mon, boys, let's show this hard case what we do to leather-whackers in Globe! One of you git a rail! We'll fix 'im!"

Seeing that these men were not only ugly but determined to start a fracas, Shane knew from experience that he must take the offensive instantly. A man of action, no sooner had the thought flashed through his mind than he was wading in, caring not one whit what his lashing fists contacted so long as they struck home. He sent men reeling right and left before his furious onslaught. But he did not get clear. Others sprang to combat and he found himself hemmed in.

Striking, slugging, kicking, pounding, Shane swayed the sweating miners back and forth, bruising, maiming, cursing. This delay was making him frantic, for the man he'd been following was Lume!

The miners felt the turbulence of his emotions; his strength and endurance were those of a madman and the speed of his smashing fists incredible. One by one he bowled them down, or

sent them staggering back into the gloomy shadows beyond reach of the lights where they gladly deserted the battle which had proved to be much hotter than they'd bargained for.

At last Shane found himself alone —alone, that is, save for a number of groaning ex-combatants scattered prostrate or on hands and knees about him on the plank walk and in the dust of the street. But Lume, if Lume it had been, had vanished.

With a bitter oath Shane struck off down the walk with angry strides, glancing hurriedly into each place of business as he passed. With each progressive yard his anger grew until a raging passion was visible in his usually complacent gaze, and his mouth was a tight straight line.

Then, just as he was about to think that once again Lume had made good his escape, Lume came out of a café with several packages under one arm and without a glance to right or left continued down the street.

Cautiously, striding along behind a pair of conversing punchers, Shane followed, determined this time to trace the slippery Jarson to his lair. Shane was careful that the punchers unconsciously screened him from Lume's vision, each time he reached a lighted area, in the event that Lume should glance around. Shane followed his quarry to the Copper House, a dingy hotel on a side street where shadows were more than plentiful.

Waiting until Lume had passed within, Shane moved casually to the porch where a group of hard-faced loafers sat smoking in chairs tilted back against the wall. As casually, then, he strolled inside as Lume's boots disappeared up a staircase at the rear of the littered lobby.

Shane thoughtfully regarded the sallow-faced clerk behind the desk in a railed-off portion near the stairs while he rolled himself a smoke. The man's eyes slid about uneasily under Shane's steady regard.

A preacher clad in rusty black came in and stopped beside the desk. Shane caught the words distinctly as the sky-pilot asked:

"Can you tell me, brother, if Mr. Jarson Lume is in his room?"

The clerk regarded the sky-pilot suspiciously. But at last he said, "Yeah—room ten."

THE preacher thanked him and started up the stairs. Shane followed. The preacher paused before Number Ten and knocked. In a few moments Shane heard Lume's voice call:

"Who's there?"

The preacher said, "The Reverend Wilkes."

Shane flattened himself against the wall as the door swung open long enough to admit Mr. Wilkes and then swung sharply shut behind him.

Shane waited, devil's temper stirring behind the smoky gray of his eyes. Abruptly he heard the rise of angry voices from beyond the door. In three long strides he was outside it, crouching, one hand grasping the knob. Softly he turned it and, as he had suspected, found the door locked.

Then he heard Lize scream, "I won't marry you! You'll never make me!" And the preacher's quavery voice raised in protest.

Shane waited for no more, but hurled himself against the door. Although fury rioted in his veins, one coherent thought thrust through the red madness in his brain. It was much more than a thought; it was a gripping white-hot desire—he must reach and destroy Lume instantly!

The door gave way with a rending, splintered crash and the momentum of his blow sent Shane lurching on within, his blazing eyes taking in the scene in one swift stabbing glance.

Lume was on the aggressive; his face was hideous and awful in its savage passion as he grabbed for Lize—and missed. Both whirled as the door crashed down. The preacher's face was deathly white.

Jarson Lume cursed viciously, terribly as he glared. Shane's lips were

parted tautly over his hard white gleaming teeth; his rage was more awful than Lume's in the chill quiet of its intensity. His gray eyes, like smoking sage, alive with the cold warning of imminent violent action rode across Lume's snarling features.

Lize Corbin's cheeks were deathly white, her lips entirely devoid of color.

Like a statue stood the preacher, face gray, alarmed and fearful, his diminutive body taut. The room's temperature seemed to have dropped to zero, yet his forehead was steeped in sweat.

Shane's voice crossed the silence in a cold, wicked drawl: "Lume, you've reached the end of your rope."

The atmosphere was tense while for two seconds there was silence. Lume broke it with a ripped-out curse and sent his right hand streaking inside his coat.

His gun glinted in the light, spat flame. But terror, or perhaps the passion that rocked him, shook his aim. The angry whine of his lead hemmed Shane; he could hear the bullets splintering the wall behind him. Then his gun was out. It barked shortly from his hip—just once. A grin parted his lips vindictively when Jarson Lume clutched his chest and crumpled backward across a table that went down beneath his weight.

Shane sheathed his gun and, leaping forward, caught Lize as she would have fallen in her reaction from the strain. Her arms closed round his neck convulsively and she hid a tear-wet face against his breast while great sobs shook her body.

The parson came out of his palsied trance and started for the door. But—

"Wait," Shane said, and stopped him with a foot still tautly raised in air. Shane laughed at his embarrassment and the look of ludicrous panic on his face. "I'm allowin'," Shane added, "we're goin' to have a use for you directly. It'll oblige me mighty much if you'd just stick around a spell."

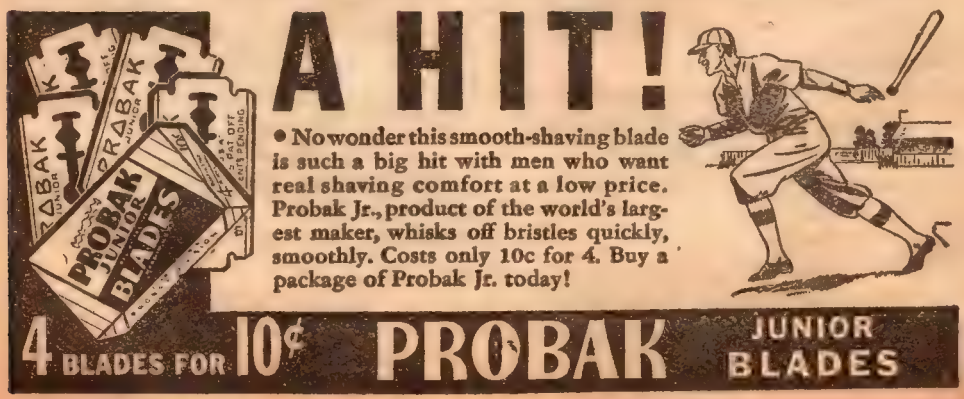
Pulling free of his protecting arm, Lize brushed the tears from her starry eyes. "An' then we can leave this terrible country forever. Dad passed me on the secret of his discovery. The location of his strike, I mean. We can—"

"It don't make a shuck's worth of diff'rence to me whether Dry Camp Corbin found gold or not—"

"But he *did!*" Lize interrupted excitedly.

"Makes no diff'rence. I got plenty dinero for both of us, an' a durn good ranch in Texas besides. Lize, there's nothin' more to hold me in this country but you. Obe Struthers, now Lume is finished, will get his mine back an' everythin' will be ironed out smooth as a whistle.

"Lize—" Shane's voice grew soft with longing — "tomorrow's a new day. An' it's almost here." He flashed a significant look at the staring parson. "What say we start it right?"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LEAD-MARKED LEGACY

By Kirk Mashburn

Jimmie Nolan learns that bullet lead isn't the only brand of lead that packs a wallop.

IT was a big Saturday night in the Silver Dollar Saloon. Spike Parker, the proprietor, stood by the door to his office, rubbing his chin with satisfaction as he glanced around at his well-filled barroom.

A redheaded young cowboy came through the swinging doors from the street. Spying Parker, he walked back.

"Haya, Spike," Jimmie Nolan greeted.

"Hello, Jimmie," Parker returned. "We haven't seen you for a month. Let's have a drink at the bar."

"I'm offa that stuff for life, Spike!"

"Your first time in town in weeks, and on a big Saturday night!" Parker marveled. "What kind of Irish do you spring from?"

"None!" Jimmie Nolan grinned prompt retort. "Us Nolans don't spring from anybody—we spring at 'em!" His blue eyes quickly sobered above his grin. "I got oiled to the gills last time I was here, and lost seven hundred dollars I didn't have, in yore poker game. That's the only reason I'm here tonight."

"You asked for it," Parker reminded. "I tried to stop you, and you got hostile, thinking I didn't like to take your I. O. U."

"I'm not blamin' yuh," Jimmie said. "Only seven hundred dollars is a lot more'n I can pay, till after the roundup, an' I sell some stock. Can yuh wait that long?"

"Sure. But come in here," Parker said, motioning Jimmie into the office.

Jimmie waited while Parker sat down at an old roll-top desk and started to write with pen and ink.

"This dam' pen scratches so, I can't write," Spike grumbled disgustedly. "Haven't got another point, either. Well, a pencil will do."

He wrote with the pencil, still grumbling. "Got to get another writing tablet, too. This is the last sheet to this one." He handed what he had written to Jimmie Nolan.

"A note made payable on demand, is more businesslike," Parker explained, extending another, more worn, piece of paper. "There's your I. O. U. You can pay the note any time you're ready."

"This ought to be a lesson to you," he dryly observed, when Jimmie had signed. "If you must play poker, stay sober."

"Yuh are talkin' to a changed man, Spike," Jimmie seriously assured him.

"The only thing to slow you down for good," Parker said skeptically, "is the right kind of girl."

"I got her!" Jimmie triumphantly declared. "Only reason I ain't asked her, yet, is because she's been visitin' over in Plainsville since her uncle died, coupla weeks back."

"You talking about Mary Lou Ellis, Jimmie?"

"Correc'!" Nolan acknowledged

FROWNING, Spike Parker stroked his neat black mustache. "You've been sticking on your ranch those two weeks," he said slowly, "so I'll tell you what it's plain you haven't heard. Mary Lou got back, day before yesterday, just in time to get put off the ranch she inherited from her Uncle George Ellis. Lon Benbow has got a past due note for twenty thousand dollars, more than the outfit is worth, that his bank loaned Ellis.

"I knew Mary Lou was broke, and too proud to put up on anybody, so I offered her a job singing in the Silver Dollar."

"What!" Jimmie Nolan incredulously exploded.

"She went on for her first number, just before you came," Parker affirmed half defiantly. "The crowd liked her."

"I'm gonna see her," Jimmie rasped, his blue eyes hotly probing Parker. "Where is she?"

Jimmie found Mary Lou in a little room above the dance hall, as Parker directed. Under his angry, accusing look, the girl's smooth cheeks flushed; but her frank brown eyes bravely met his.

She was young, barely twenty, and as pretty as Jimmie thought she was.

"It's true, then," Jimmie said bitterly. "When yuh thought yuh was sittin' pretty, with yore uncle's ranch due to pass to yuh, yuh wouldn't have thought of keepin' company with a saloonkeeper, a gambler. But now you can work in his honkytonk to get his money."

Mary Lou's deep humiliation turned swiftly into furious resentment. She said nothing about being penniless and actually in debt, after using what little cash there was, to bury her uncle. She thought she could get work in San Antonio, but

first she had to get money to go on, and to live until something turned up.

"What right have you to object?" she demanded, the question like cold water in Jimmie's face.

"Reckon that's correc'," he slowly admitted, turning and closing the door between them.

He found Parker still in his office.

"Spike," Jimmie coldly announced, "I've figured yuh a white man, the only square gambler I ever heard of. Right now, I'm announcin' yuh're a low-down buzzard."

"Careful, Jimmie!" Parker softly warned. "That's fighting talk."

"Everybody in Palo Duro knows Len Benbow's bank is backin' yuh," Jimmie persisted. "Yuh two are in cahoots on this, too. Yuh couldn't get at Mary Lou any other way, so yuh got Benbow to kick her off her ranch."

"That's a lie!" Parker sprang up from his chair.

His Irish temper exploding, Jimmie hit first. His fist smashed into Parker's white face, knocking the gambler back against the wall.

"Reckon yuh've got a gun hid on yuh, like every other tinhorn card sharp," Jimmie snarled, his own Colt in his hand. "Don't try pullin' it, Parker!"

Not until he had backed well away from the door did he holster the gun. Then, past startled men at the bar, Jimmie flung out to the street.

FOR the first time in his happy-go-lucky life, he was resenting being broke. The seven hundred dollars he had thrown away to Parker hurt worst of all. The comforting feel of the horse under him, the five-mile ride to his ranch, cooled his temper. He wished, with an inward groan, that he'd shown more sense with Mary Lou. Hitting Spike Parker hadn't helped anything, either.

The next day was Sunday. By noon, Jimmie had made up his mind to ride back to town, to see Mary Lou. He'd be hard up until he could sell some beef after the spring roundup, but he couldn't let Mary Lou stay in the Silver Dollar until then. If he could fix things up with her, she wouldn't be afraid to buck hard times with him. She came of women who had made homes while their men fought Indians.

About the time he had made up his mind, old Castro, the Silver Dollar's Mexican swamper, rode up. He had a note from Spike Parker, short and to the point:

> Your note to me is due on demand, of which this is notice. Please arrange payment of the full amount of seven hundred dollars, tomorrow, at the Palo Duro Bank.

"He's bein' spiteful," Jimmie told the uninterested Mexican, "but he can take it out in spite. He knows darn well I can't raise seven hundred dollars that quick."

The thought came to him that he could see Mary Lou and also try to mollify Parker, on the same trip.

"Wait a minute, Castro," he amended. "Tell yore boss I'm ridin' in to see him, about three o'clock this afternoon."

Theoretically, the Silver Dollar was closed on Sundays. The gambling games and dance hall actually were, but there was no bolt on the discreetly shut doors, to keep thirsty souls from the bar. Mike, the bartender, was ministering to several such, when Jimmie Nolan entered.

"Spike in the office, Mike?" Jimmie asked. "He sent Castro out with a note this mornin', an' I told the Mex to tell him I'd be here aroun' this time."

"In that case, he's in the office," Mike said, the hostile scowl with which he had greeted Jimmie's entrance clearing.

Jimmie knocked on the office door. He had to repeat, impatiently, before an almost inaudible voice inside huskily invited, "Come in!"

Jimmie swung the door inward and entered. Spike Parker was in the

chair before his desk, back turned to the door. Something about the way he was sitting, almost like a dummy propped in the chair, struck Jimmie as queer. He stepped forward, and the door slammed behind him. Out of the corner of his eye, Jimmie had a brief glimpse of a blur that swung toward him. Something smashed against his head, inside which a million stars exploded, then died out in blackness.

Jimmie's skull was fairly thick, and his Stetson softened the blow. He stirred on the floor and groaned. Dimly, then, as if from far away, he heard the roar of a gun. It seemed ages after that, until rough hands lifted him, shook him violently to aching consciousness.

THE thing that Jimmie Nolan's eyes first focused on was Spike Parker, hanging limply over the arm of his chair, which was facing the door. There was a bullet hole in the middle of Parker's forehead. Mike, the bartender, and a Swede horse wrangler by name of Olsen, were holding Jimmie up.

"Lemme sit down," Jimmie groaned. "My head is gonna bust."

Mike said harshly, "It orta! I guess Spike throwed that whisky bottle, the same minute yuh shot him."

"I shot him?" Jimmie echoed, forgetting his throbbing head. "Yuh're plumb loco. Somebody was standin' where the door hid him when I opened it, an' slammed it an' me, together."

"Yah!" Olsen agreed, heavily sarcastic. He showed Jimmie's own gun in the palm of his huge hand. "Das gon was on dot flure, yust under yure hand. Aye suppos' das empty shell went off when yuh foll down!"

A tall, middle-aged man pushed into the room from the bar. The newcomer's height was in long legs, which supported a short, fat body, giving him a spidery look. Like a spider in its web, Lon Benbow sat in his bank, pulling the strings that controlled most of Palo Duro County.

A dozen voices clamored to tell the banker what they thought had happened. "The sheriff's been sent for," someone put in.

Lon Benbow stared at Nolan with bulging eyes in a white face. Jimmie felt vaguely surprised that Benbow, cold and unemotional, should seem so shaken and upset by Parker's fate. Behind that, Jimmie sensed in the banker's mind, a hard and implacable purpose toward himself.

"Cold-blooded murder!" Benbow spoke huskily. "I wouldn't have believed it, Nolan!"

Jimmie thought fast. Benbow condemned him. Just as Spike Parker had been, Sheriff Sid West was a member of Benbow's political organization. Jimmie was on friendly terms with most of the men around him, but they believed he had murdered Parker. In jail, in charge of a hostile and prejudiced sheriff, he would have slim chances to prove his innocence by finding the real killer—which was going to be a man-sized job, anyway.

There was another door in the office, a rear exit from the building. The key was in the lock. Jimmie calculated his chances of getting his gun from Olsen, and making a break through that door and to his horse.

Just then, Mary Lou Ellis, dressed for riding, pushed her way through the crowd. Sheriff West was close behind her. Mary Lou looked once at Spike Parker, then turned her white face to the man accused of his murder.

"Jimmie," her voice was low and desperately earnest, "you didn't do it?"

"No, Mary Lou," Jimmie winced as he shook his aching head, but his eyes met hers steadily. In a few jerky words, he told her what had happened.

The sheriff brushed against the girl, pushing forward to claim his prisoner. It was easy for Mary Lou to snatch the pistol from his holster.

She jabbed West's own gun in his side.

"Get yours from Olsen!" she cried to Jimmie, her eyes flashing with excitement.

THE slow-thinking Olsen was gaping at her, instead of watching Jimmie Nolan. Jimmie jerked his arm free, scooping his gun from the Swede's slack grasp. A crack of the barrel across his wrist got rid of Mike's clutch. The unexpectedness of Mary Lou's action, their disadvantage because she was a girl, gave Jimmie the minute needed to get the drop on the crowd.

"I'm goin' out that back door," he announced, with deadly finality, "an' I'll really do some killin' if anybody tries to leave or stop me. Come on, Mary Lou!"

His hearers saw willingness to kill in his face. They crowded aside, giving him room to back to the door, Mary Lou going first. He heard the door open, and her surprised murmur:

"It isn't locked!"

"I'll hold 'em here," he told her. "Get my horse from the hitchrack in front. Hurry up!"

"I'm jumpy as hell," he told the men who faced his gun. "Don't do anything to make my trigger-finger jerk!"

As they looked into the gun they believed had killed Parker, it may have seemed as long to them as it did to Jimmie, until Mary Lou spoke behind him.

"I put the key outside," she murmured. "Slam the door and lock it."

Jimmie had vaulted into the saddle on his rangy palamino gelding, before discovering that Mary Lou was mounted on a clean-limbed mare he had seen her ride many times before.

"They'll put me in jail," she said, preventing any argument by spurring to a leaping start which the palamino jumped jealously to overtake.

"Where can we hide?" Mary Lou called above the pound of hoofs.

"A dozen places—Painted Canyon for one," Jimmie said. "But what good'll it do? We can't hole up forever, without food, or even blankets."

"We'll have a little time to think what to do," Mary Lou retorted, "without half of Palo Duro County on our backs."

Painted Canyon was a broad, rambling gash in the plains, with plenty of places to hide in its weathered formations, and rough, scrub-grown side washes. Jimmie reasoned that their pursuers would expect them to head first of all for his ranch. A short cut led off to the canyon in the opposite direction. Luckily, the trail they took turned off after the road topped a ridge that put them out of sight from behind.

Once in Painted Canyon, Jimmie soon found a place he thought would do, where the steep sides of a short but deep arroyo entered. There was a little spring, and patches of toboso grass.

They settled down to wait for the cover of darkness, not far off. The brief dusk of the plains already was settling, when Jimmie told Mary Lou:

"I'll have to go to the house, later on. There's a little money there, grub and blankets. Reckon we'll have to ride the back trails to New Mexico, till this sorta blows over."

After a moment of silence, he mused, "I'm talkin' like it was all set, yuh goin' with me."

Mary Lou didn't answer. It already was too dark to see her face plainly, but she seemed to Jimmie to be lost in thought.

"I still don't see why yuh took a hand in this game," he persisted.

Mary Lou answered that. "Because I knew you weren't a murderer, and I was afraid of what they might do to you. I knew they wouldn't be fair." Her low voice revealed more than her words. "I saw enough of them in the dance hall, to know they are like beasts."

"Anyway," Jimmie hotly declared, "yuh're not goin' back to any dance hall!"

"I've been thinking," Mary Lou said, "and you're wrong. I'm going back to that one, later this very night! You surprised whoever killed Parker," she hurried on, "but he was smart enough to take advantage of it."

"He didn't miss!" Jimmie gloomily agreed.

"The shot that the crowd at the bar heard," Mary Lou continued, "was fired after you were knocked down, and Parker was already dead. Before anyone came, the killer escaped by the back door. It was unlocked."

"What did yuh mean about goin' back tonight?" Jimmie asked. "Yuh think we might find something?"

"The killer left in a hurry, Jimmie. He didn't have time to cover all his tracks, and as long as everybody thought you shot Parker, he didn't need to. Nobody looked; but we might find something."

"We can make it," Jimmie admitted. "I brought the key to the back door, an' it's the last place anybody would be watchin' for us."

THEY started for town a little before midnight. There was no moon, and with only the stars to see, they rode wraithlike up to the rear door of the Silver Dollar, the horses' hoofs muffled in the soft earth. After they dismounted, Jimmie fitted the key, and they slipped inside. Mary Lou pulled down the shade of the one window.

"Be quiet," she warned in a whisper. "The bartender sleeps upstairs."

Jimmie struck a match. There was an oil lamp on the roll-top desk, which he lighted, turned low.

Both of them had hopes of finding something that could have been used to kill Parker without leaving an obvious wound; some object heavier and less fragile than the empty bottle Spike was assumed to have thrown at Jimmie. To their disappointment, they found nothing.

"If we could only know who would have had reason to quarrel with Parker," Mary Lou said despairingly, "we'd have something to start with."

"Plenty of folks," Jimmie said. "Spike had an ornery, spiteful streak, although I just found it out."

He was thinking of the note Parker had sent by Castro and of his petulance over the scratching pen when he had written that other note for Jimmie to sign.

Idly, Jimmie glanced at the desk. "He lost his temper because his pen scratched, and he had to use a lead pencil," he thought. "Looks like he jabbed it down and broke the point, just for spite."

Parker had gotten the new writing tablet he had grumbled to Jimmie about needing. Jimmie picked the pad up. His eyes narrowing suddenly, he held it close to the lamp.

"Look here, Mary Lou!" His voice shook with excitement. "Parker wrote a note with a hard lead pencil. The first few words pressed into this sheet hard enough to read on it. It looks plenty like dynamite, if we could only read it all."

"I think we can," Mary Lou said breathlessly, peering eagerly at the paper.

"Both of yuh reach high!" snarled a voice. Jimmie wheeled. The move for his gun halted midway; he slowly lifted his hands. Mike, the bartender, stood in the doorway to the bar, a gun in his hand pointed at Jimmie's stomach.

"I thought I heard something goin' on down here." Mike's little eyes glittered with satisfaction.

"Look here, Mike," Mary Lou urged, "and I'll show you who killed Spike Parker."

"I already know!" Mike retorted; but his eyes shifted curiously from Jimmie to her. That was the chance Jimmie waited for. His foot swung up, the toe of his boot knocking up Mike's fat wrist.

The bartender fumbled with the pistol, but managed to hold it. Jimmie sprang and grabbed his wrist, forcing the gun up.

Mike was strong, for all his fat. His free hand blocked Jimmie's draw, while he struggled to jerk loose with the gun. The gun suddenly went off, plowing a bullet into the ceiling, just as Jimmie's fist sank with a thud in Mike's middle.

The wind went out of Mike with an agonized "Whoof!" He doubled over and sank to the floor, gasping and glassy-eyed.

"That settles him," Jimmie said grimly. "But that shot'll settle us, too, unless we make tracks, pronto."

"Let's take this tablet to old Judge Sloan's," Mary Lou urged. "That's the one place in town people won't dare storm into, until we've had time to try and read the whole note."

Jimmie looked at her sharply, and nodded. If Mary Lou had an idea, he'd gamble on it. There wasn't time to ask her about it. They could hear people shouting and running toward the saloon, as they swung into their saddles.

BEHIND the buildings on Main Street, they rode at a gallop to the little cottage on the edge of town, where Judge Sloan lived. The judge of Palo Duro County Court was the one office holder in the county who owed nothing to Lon Benbow's faction, and could be endlessly re-elected over Benbow's opposition.

Mary Lou's urgent knocking brought the night-shirted old judge to the door.

"Wait till I get my pants on," Judge Sloan apologized, when Jimmie tersely informed him they wanted to show him a clue to Spike Parker's killer.

The judge was returning, when a bulky silhouette swung through the front gate and started for the porch.

"Give up, Nolan!" Sheriff West's heavy voice challenged. "Mike heard yuh say where yuh were headin', an' I've got yuh." Whatever other faults he had, there was no yellow in Sid West's back.

"We just want to see Judge Sloan," Jimmie returned. "Come in with us for a minute. If yuh want to try arrestin' me after yuh see what we've got, yuh're welcome to try!"

Alertly suspicious, the sheriff reached the porch as Judge Sloan came back to the door, a lighted lamp in his hand.

"Come in, come in!" the old man invited. "Oh, hello, sheriff."

"The sheriff is coming, too," Mary Lou said sweetly. "He's going to be interested in this."

Something in her tone caused West to slide his gun slowly into its holster, and step into the house with the others. The judge put his lamp on a table, and looked inquiringly at his visitors. Mary Lou placed the tablet from Parker's desk down beside the lamp.

"Sheriff," Jimmie abruptly demanded, "did you ever see a man with a bullet hole in his head bleed as little as Spike Parker did?"

"Why, that's right, come to think of it," West admitted, looking puzzled.

"That's because the bullet didn't kill him," Mary Lou retorted. "Parker was dead at least several minutes before it was fired. Get the coroner to sober up enough to look, and he probably will find evidence that Parker was hit over the head, just as Jimmie was."

"The killer didn't know I was comin' along," Jimmie said, "but when I did, he covered his own tracks by writin' my name on Spike's forehead."

The sheriff shook his head. Before he could speak, Jimmie shot at him:

"That's not enough for yuh. All right, sheriff! We found this—" he indicated the pad on the table—"on Spike Parker's desk. It was a new tablet, an' it looks like he'd written just one note on it, with a lead pencil. The print of his pencil's plain

enough to read, on this sheet that was underneath."

Sheriff West bent down and looked at the blank paper, peering closer after a first skeptical look. He swallowed twice before he could rasp the comment: "It might mean somethin', if it all could be read, plain."

"I think it can be. That's why we came here, where we could have a chance to try," Mary Lou soberly answered.

SHE turned to Jimmie. There was a pencil on the table. Under her direction, he split the lead from the wood, and scraped it into powder with his knife. It made a little black pile, on paper from the bottom of Parker's tablet. Mary Lou's forefinger carefully spread the powdered lead, rubbing it over part of the paper until it made a smooth, shiny coating. Satisfied, she dusted off loose particles.

The three men watched, puzzled and expectant, while Mary Lou turned the coated surface down. With the flat of her palm, she rubbed it vigorously over the blank sheet on top of the pad. Finally, she uncovered the result.

"Look!" she cried in triumph.

The pencil lead had blackened the paper, on the sheet above which Spike Parker had written his last note. But the imprint of his hard lead pencil, escaping contact with the pressure of Mary Lou's palm, stood out as white, legible script!

Fingers trembling with excitement, Judge Sloan adjusted his spectacles and read aloud:

Dear Lou:

I am not holding out on you. My share from the Silver Dollar just has gone up, because I have plans to marry the Ellis girl you played into my hands no matter how much you want her to get away from here. While you're making threats, don't forget I know you did time in the Nevada Pen for forgery. You probably forged George Ellis' name, after his death, to that note you used to steal his ranch from his niece.

"It's signed just with the initial, 'P'."

"It don't need a signature," Sheriff West breathed heavily, in the silence following Judge Sloan's reading. "Even that tracin' can't be mistook for anything but Spike Parker's fancy writin'."

"I'll find out whether the note Lon Benbow put in as a claim, in my court, against the Ellis estate was a forgery," Judge Sloan angrily promised. "You'll certainly telegraph the Nevada State Prison and check that part, sheriff!"

"If it's true, it's shore reason for him to get scared an' kill Parker to keep him quiet," said West. "Specially as him givin' Mary Lou a job kept her from leavin' here, where she was liable to stumble onto that note bein' a fake. Lon acted jumpy as heck, too, when Spike was found dead this afternoon."

To be elected sheriff, Sid West had winked at things like open gambling in the Silver Dollar, and liquor sold on Sundays. Murder was another thing.

"Keep that paper till I want it, judge, for the jury to hang Lon Benbow on," he grimly requested. "I'm goin', right now, an' arrest him for Spike Parker's murder."

He started for the door. It had been left unlocked, and before the sheriff reached it, the door was flung open violently in his face. Framed against the darkness, a shotgun leveled in his hands, stood Lon Benbow.

"Hands up—everybody!"

Benbow's voice was high-pitched with strain. He stepped inside, the shotgun forcing West slowly back. In the lamplight, his face was drawn and white. For the very reason that violence was not his natural way of doing things, the weapon in Lon Benbow's nervous, unaccustomed hands was doubly dangerous.

Mike, the Silver Dollar's ubiquitous bartender, oozed his bulk in from the darkness, kicking the door shut be-

hind him with a heel. There was a pistol in his hand.

"Mike told me about your finding the tablet, and where you went with it," Benbow snarled at Jimmie Nolan. "I guessed the rest."

"What about it?" Jimmie drawled.

"Your gun is going to shoot West, old Sloan, and the girl—the same way it shot Parker!" Benbow almost whispered. "With that little piece of paper gone, I'll be a hero for killing you with my shotgun! Get his gun, Mike!"

The shotgun was scant inches from the sheriff's belt buckle. Mike stepped heavily around toward Jimmie, taking Benbow's attention for an instant. West's hands shot out and grabbed the shotgun, twisting it upward.

Mike was reaching for Jimmie's holster, when the shotgun exploded with a roar. The bartender whirled and fired at West, just as the sheriff twisted the shotgun which both clutched, swinging Benbow around. Benbow jerked convulsively as Mike's bullet hit his back. Slowly, his long legs crumpled under him.

Snatching his gun out, Jimmie brought it down like a hammer on the back of Mike's head.

"It's been a hard night on Mike," he said tightly, the floor quivering with the thud of Mike's fall.

Benbow was dead. The judge went back to bed. Last to leave, Mary Lou and Jimmie walked toward the gate and their horses.

"That note is certain to prove a forgery," Jimmie was saying. "Yuh'll get back yore spread, right next to mine."

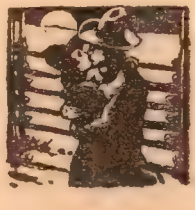
They had reached the horses.

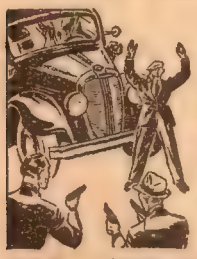
"Yore place an' mine, together, would make a larrypin' outfit, Mary Lou," Jimmie awkwardly suggested.

"Yes," Mary Lou softly agreed.

Jimmie's laugh came from the Irish in him.

"Let's go back an' get Judge Sloan to fix it up, right this minute," he chuckled. "But it's gonna be sorta tough on the judge, roustin' him out of bed again!"





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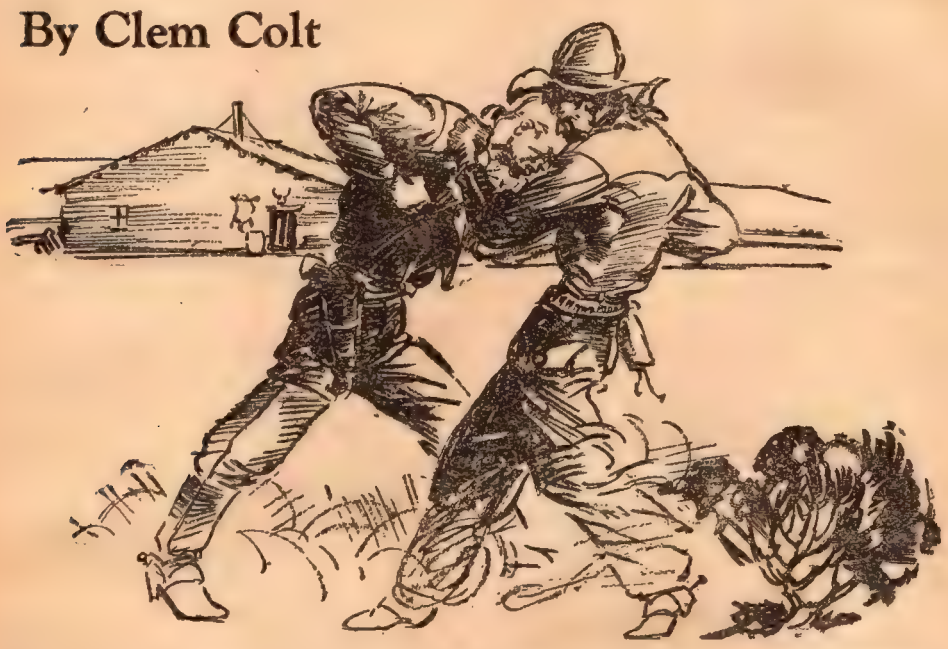
By Clem Colt



An eight-year hate had been burning to vengeance heat, while Pecos Larb paid for another man's crime behind the bars. But when he returned for a pistol payoff, he found a dead man and a gutted ranch.

PECOS LARB rode squarely into the sandstorm. The lashing force of the wind gusts rocked him in his double-rig saddle. Flying particles of swirling grit stung his flesh, inflamed his eyes, burned like heated needles in his nose and mouth and sifted even through his clothes. The great sand cloud, sweeping angrily across the broad bosom of the desert, raged and roared. Jerking his neckerchief above his nose and pulling the broad brim of his San An hat down to shield his eyes, Pecos Larb arched his satanic brows, grinned sardonically and urged his big roan on.

Neither sandstorms, hell, nor high water should be permitted to stand in the way of his reaching Tom Tyler's Half Circle C. This ride was the culmination of an eight-year hate; there was a mark that Pecos Larb was anxious to rub out.

As he rode through the murky gusts he seemed like some fierce thing reared by the desert itself. He was lean, hard and strong with the enduring, indomitable strength of the desert's own fibrous growth. Though young, one would hardly have guessed it by his face, for harsh lines were graven deeply on those saturnine features. And there were

other things about him that added to the impression of an age far in excess of that which he had actually attained.

He flung cursing jeers at the storm from time to time. Whirling sand and slapping wind might slow his mount's progress; might delay a few more hours his longed-for reckoning. But nothing, he told himself, should save that snake-hearted Tyler from his vengeance.

Presently a burst of muted firing roused him from his dark reflections and his back grew rigid as he raised in the saddle. He must be close to the ranch, he thought. What was the meaning of those sinister gunshots that filled the late afternoon with echoes?

There seemed something ruthlessly efficient about him as he sat stiffly in his saddle listening. Tall, lean-bodied, he was in gray woolen shirt, his dark trousers stuffed into soft-topped boots equipped with big, sharp-roweled spurs. Twin cartridge belts sagged about his lean-hipped waist supporting Colt-filled holsters that boasted neither tops nor bottoms. Half-breed holsters, scuffed and greasy. His cold tranquility hinted plainly that though there might be better shots than he, there were few whose guns spoke faster.

With a muttered oath he spurred the big roan forward. Topping a sudden rise, he viewed a wind-whipped rancho through the murk. A long narrow house, one story high, with steep pitch roof and long protruding stovepipe. A blacksmith shop. A funny little building that he remembered housed the accumulated junk of eighteen years of Tyler ranching.

But it was not on these things that Larb's cold, unwavering glance was fixed. It was on the spurts of flame that blossomed from a darkened window, on the dim forms of crouching, steeple-hatted men who were advancing toward the ranch house, jets of flame belching from the leveled weapons in their hands.

"Hell!" gritted Pecos Larb, and sent the roan lunging forward with sharp jabs of his big-roweled spurs.

Yet even as he went charging down the slope he saw red-tipped flame lick up the tinder-dry walls of the blacksmith shop, saw flame burst forth from the ranch house roof and the darkened window grow blank and mocking as the firing ceased within.

Larb yanked the carbine from the scabbard beneath the stirrup leather. Angrily it barked as he pumped hot lead at the crouching forms dimly seen through the sandy haze. A reeling man went sprawling sideways. A second clutched at his middle and jackknifed forward on his face. A third flung a swift look backward and ran toward a huddle of horses hitched among some junipers.

"Dust, you hellions! Dust!" yelled Larb, and threw the big roan forward.

A BELL-SOMBREROED outlaw with legs bowed like the staves of a barrel paused to drop behind a rock. Flame spurted around its side. A slug tore a hole in the brim of Larb's San An. Another struck his saddle fork and went whining away in ricochet. A third bit past his cheek. With dim-heard curse the outlaw jumped from his covert, ran stiltedly with desperate strides for the juniper clump, his hat bells tinkling to each thrust of his booted feet.

Larb's carbine spat. The bow-legged runner pitched headlong, rolled several paces, bounded to his feet and went lurching on. Larb let him go and turned his attention to the burning buildings.

Before the ranch house porch he flung from the saddle, lit on skidding boot heels as the surviving outlaws rode from the junipers and drummed away into the dust-fogged murk.

Larb's muscled shoulder struck the flimsy door and hurled it open. Hungry flames lit the house's interior like a noonday sun. Larb thrust an arm

before his face to shield his eyes and fought his way to where a limp form lay beneath a shattered window. A man in faded range attire. "Tom Tyler!" gritted Larb, and cursed.

Blood smeared the rancher's shirt in a crimson stain, Larb saw, as he stooped, got his arms beneath Tyler's body and hoisted the man to a shoulder. With streaming eyes Larb staggered through the fire-wreathed smoke to the yard outside. Thirty feet from the burning house he eased his burden down. He ran to his horse, got his canteen. Uncorking it, he forced water between the stiff lips of the dying rancher. Tyler's faded eyes blinked open. Larb leaned close.

"Speak, damn you! Who bossed that raid?"

The rancher's lips worked, but no sound came. His head rolled back against Larb's supporting arm. Breath whistled shrilly through his clenched teeth. Easing the limp form down to the yellow earth, Larb straightened to his feet, blue eyes bleak as agate.

"Too late!" he laughed hoarsely. "Too late as usual!" His tight lips curled sardonically. "Who sups with the devil needs a damned long spoon!"

Larb strode to his horse, hung the canteen to his saddle horn and climbed aboard to sit eyeing bitterly the towering flames he was unable single-handed to combat. "Dead man an' a gutted ranch! A hell of a lot I'll get from them!"

It was only a short time since he had been released from San Quentin, so it was but natural for his thoughts to turn to the circumstances attending his eight-year confinement to that grim institution as he watched the crackling flames.

For several months previous to that visit, Hawk Atwood's gang of rustlers and train robbers—of which Pecos Larb had been a newly recruited member—had been operating on a large scale. Cattle had vanished in wholesale numbers. Three trains had been stopped within a month. The authorities had seemed unable to check the crimes. Then abruptly the activities of Atwood's gang had ceased—ceased with the murder of a Mex sheepherder and the arrest of young Larb, charged with the killing.

Just a kid with a crazy longing for adventure. Well, he reflected grimly, he'd found it; an eight-year stretch in the penitentiary for a murder he'd known nothing of.

His trial was a hazy memory. There had been talk of his being leader of the havoc-raising desperadoes. He had paid but scant attention to the proceedings, but realized that he must have been convicted on circumstantial evidence. He had been known as a wild young hellion. Tom Tyler, he remembered, had sworn to having seen him near the place where the murder had been committed. The times checked. Likely some one *had* been seen by Tyler, but it had not been Pecos Larb. He had returned to demand a reckoning—returned to a dead man and a gutted ranch!

He frowned as he always did when recalling the chore he'd been doing for Atwood at the very time of the murder. Naturally, he had not told the court. His loyalty had been too strong. He had expected Atwood somehow to get him off. But evidently the great Atwood, looked upon by the world at large as a prosperous and highly respectable rancher, had deemed intervention inadvisable. Larb had done his stretch.

Pale features grim, Larb glanced about him. The pole corrals were rings of smoldering ashes; the chute and squeeze were gone. Of the buildings, only the blacksmith shop remained.

"Grab for the sky, hombre!" came a sharp command from behind.

So absorbed in his reflections had Larb been that he had failed to hear the approach. Turning slowly in his saddle to behold the speaker, he suddenly stiffened. He found himself staring at the slender, willowy fig-

ure of a girl. She was creamy-skinned, with a glint of sunlight in the spun-gold hair that fell beneath her Stetson. Her jade-green eyes held a fierce anger as they clashed with Larb's.

Not even the old Levi's, boots and calico shirt she wore were able to eradicate the firm clean lines of her splendid body, nor hide her delicate charm.

Great guns! he thought. Was this Tom Tyler's girl? Was this the gangling kid in pigtails he had known eight years ago? Staring at her, Pecos Larb was abruptly conscious of a hungry, unsuspected longing deep within him.

"Are you deaf?" the girl broke in upon his thoughts. "I said to get those hands up—pronto!"

LARB slowly raised his hands as he observed the cool, determined manner with which she held her leveled pistol. The corners of his mouth quirked upward in the beginnings of a grin. "Is this a stick-up? If it is, you won't make enough to pay you for your bother, ma'am."

"What's the meaning of those—" her left hand indicated the smoldering remains of the ranch headquarters. "Who paid you to do this? Atwood?"

Larb's lips curled. "Atwood ain't got money enough to get me on his payroll!"

"Well, I wouldn't put it past him to hire some drifter to burn us out! It would be his idea of a good joke! He's a damn skunk!" she said vehemently. "I—" She stopped abruptly, seeming to catch sight of Tyler's limp figure for the first time. The gun sagged as she stared incredulously. "Is he—?"

"Yeah. I reckon he is," Larb answered grimly. "I did my best, but I was a little late gettin' here."

For a moment Larb thought she was going to break down. Then her quivering underlip grew still, though her face was pale as ashes.

"Who are you? How did you happen to be here?"

Larb glanced down at her thoughtfully. "I reckon you might call me Jingleboots. I was takin' a pasear along this way an' heard the sound of gunfire. I didn't let no grass grow. Got a couple of 'em, but was too late to save the buildin's. That fella—" he pointed toward Tyler—"was inside the house. I fetched him out."

The girl, he thought, was regarding him queerly. There was a puzzled light in her jade-green eyes. "You're a stranger around here, aren't you?"

"I don't pay no taxes here," he answered. "About this Atwood. I've heard of him. What makes you think he might have had a hand in this business? Ain't an outlaw, is he?"

"Not in name," her short laugh rang scornfully. "If the men in this country had backbones instead of wishbones, they'd have run him out long ago! He just about runs this county—owns the sheriff, judge, most of the land, all the business that's worth a hoot and about everything else. He—he thinks he owns me!"

"Regular 'dog with the brass collar,' eh? Must be right smart of a man."

"He's a damn polecat!" Fury blazed in her strange green eyes. "He's the one that's murdered my father! He might just as well have pulled the trigger! He's been trying to make up to me for months. I told Dad about it last week and he ordered Atwood off the place. But before he left, Atwood said we'd both regret it. And now—" her hands gestured helplessly toward the smoldering ashes of the gutted buildings, and her eyes grew bright with unshed tears.

Larb regarded her thoughtfully. Plainly she was a girl with backbone—gritty and independent. A girl after his own heart—even if she *was* the daughter of that lying sidewinder, Tom Tyler, He felt an odd desire to help her.

"Didn't your dad hire any punchers?" In the old days, he remembered that Tyler had always had an extra man about the place.

"We couldn't afford any, lately. We used to have one, but he was killed about a year ago in a clash with rustlers. The breeds thrive well in this man's climate," she added bitterly. "They've stole us poor. I doubt if we've fifty cattle left!"

She had put her pistol back in its holster. Now her hands clenched as she said fiercely: "I can't prove it, but I'll bet anything that Hawk Atwood is the biggest thief inside five hundred miles!"

Larb said nothing. But remembering Atwood's activities of old, he thought it likely she was right. "Could you use a—a hired hand?" he wondered.

She laughed shortly. "Doesn't seem hardly worth while to hire some one to round up the few cattle we've got left. Besides, we—" she caught her breath—"besides I haven't any money to pay you with," she finished hurriedly.

Larb's tight lips grinned. "Shucks, money's no object with me. You furnish me with grub an' smokin' and I'll take care of the work. You got to have some place to stay till a new house can be fixed up," he pointed out. "Only place you got now is that funny-looking shed. It'll take some cleanin' out, I reckon. I—" His voice trailed off as a new expression crossed her mobile face.

Her eyes had been studying him closely as he spoke. Now he saw them widen, startled. Twin spots of angry red came into her cheeks.

"Jingleboots!" Her red lips curled back in an expression of intense loathing. Her eyes snapped with green fire. "I know you, now! I've been trying to think where I've seen you before. You're Pecos Larb!"

His grim lips curled into a bleak smile, his hard glance was unreadable as agate. "The man Tom Tyler sent to the penitentiary."

"You—you killer! You came here to murder my father!"

"I was a little late," he pointed out.

"That's a damn lie! You killed him. You burned our ranch!" She jerked the gun from her holster.

"I hate to contradict a lady," Larb said, "but if you'll use your eyes a little you'll see that your old man ain't the only corpse in this clearing."

"Some of your gang! Get out of here! Dust! Make tracks before I do murder!" she lashed, and the gun trembled in her hand.

Larb shrugged. "The dog with the bad name," he said with bitter irony, and turned his horse away.

ABOVE him a yellow moon climbed the purple sky. As he rode through the night Pecos Larb entertained many thoughts, most of them bitter. It was a romantic sort of night with millions of lazy, low-hanging stars twinkling in the heaven's dark vault. But Pecos Larb saw them not.

The desert about him was calm and solemn as it slumbered in the moon's mellow light. Only the soft footfalls of the big roan disturbed the drowsy hush. But Pecos Larb, enwrapped in his thoughts, had no eyes for the beauties of nature.

Tom Tyler, the treacherous old liar, had gone and got himself killed! For eight years Larb had waited to tell Tyler to his face what an ornery low-down skunk he was. And now that the time had come for telling, the man was dead. Damn the fate that would perpetrate such a ghastly prank!

He glared about with grim-eyed gaze. Here and there along the trail rose the grotesque form of a Joshua tree, its twisted branches lifted—like arms in supplication—above the mesquite, etched black and forlorn against the desert sky.

He rode at an easy jog, for he was in no hurry to get to town. If the girl was right about Hawk Atwood being behind the raid that had robbed

him of his anticipated pleasure, and it looked as though she was, plainly a call on Rancher Atwood would hardly be amiss. Atwood had seemed strangely indifferent to the matter of Larb's conviction. Something should be said about that. He hoped Atwood would be in town.

There were a number of new saloons and honkytonks, he saw, as he rode down the long main street with its false-fronted buildings, its railroad tracks and its many and divers noises.

He hitched the roan to the rack before the largest saloon in sight. Many horses were already tethered there. The blare of raucous voices, the scrape of fiddles and stamp of feet filled his ears as he strode with jingling spurs across the porch. As he parted the swinging doors, Larb saw that the rear of the place was taken up by a boisterous group of cowboys and red-shirted miners who, to the tune of *Old Joe Clark,* were whirling dance hall girls and stamping on their toes. A line of thirsty men bellied the rough bar that ran along one side of the establishment.

Larb took up a place against the wall close by the doors and scanned the crowd from beneath his down-turned hat brim. He was looking for Hawk Atwood, but saw no sign of him. About to leave, his narrowed eyes caught sight of a red-faced individual in a belled sombrero who was leaving the dance floor and making toward the bar. Larb noticed that he limped. One of the fellow's boots was shy a heel.

It was the last outlaw to taste his lead that afternoon. The bowlegged man who had fired at Larb from behind the rock. Pecos Larb grinned mirthlessly and started forward, hands swinging at his sides. At that moment the bowlegged man turned his head and saw him. A startled light seeped into his bloodshot eyes. A vicious scowl crossed his red face and his hand went jabbing hipward.

Larb's hands dropped and his guns spat flame. The red-faced outlaw in the belled sombrero crashed back against the bar. Men dodged aside as he got his gun in line, tried to bring it up. Larb fired again. The outlaw pitched to the sawdust-covered floor and lay there motionless.

Something round and hard pressed viciously against Larb's spine. "Let go them guns, you damn killer, an' get yore hands up—quick!" rasped a harsh voice in his ear.

Larb's hands went up. He felt the pistols jerked from his half-breed holsters.

Then the harsh voice said: "Turn around! Let's have a look at yore mug!"

LARB slowly turned. A burly man with a hooked nose and a star pinned on his vest eyed him up and down with pale gray orbs. Beside him stood a tall slim man in braided vest and black concha-studded chaps. The eyes below his cream-colored Stetson were opaque and smoky. It was Hawk Atwood, and there was a faint smile of amusement on his thin lips as he stared at Pecos Larb.

"Pretty fair work, Blackie," Atwood's thin voice said dryly. "First killer you've caught in the act for some time. Better look him over for a hideout gun." His grin widened. "Be careful, Blackie, he looks kind of mean."

"Don't waste your time, sheriff," Larb said coldly. "I never cart but two smoke-poles at a time. You've got 'em both in the waistband of your trousers. What's the charge, if any?"

"Charge!" the lawman snorted. "Why, yuh damn killer! Yuh tryin' to tell me yuh never shot Cordo Mayne?"

"If that hombre on the floor is Cordo Mayne, I certainly shot him," answered Larb softly. "He started to pull his gun on me an' I let him have it. It was either him or me—an' I sure wasn't wanting it to be me."

"What lie is this yuh're tryin' to hand me?" growled the sheriff. "Why should Cordo want to gun yuh?"

"It happens that I caught him an' three-four other hellions raidin' a ranch this afternoon. The Half Circle C. I took a few shots at him an' his friends. Those that were able dusted. I reckon he thought this was a good time to finish the argument."

"Yuh caught Cordo raidin' the Half Circle C? The hell yuh say! Cordo Mayne wouldn't hurt a flea! He was the gentlest hombre the Mojave's ever seen. That yarn don't wash, pilgrim. I reckon I'll have to hold yuh for murder. Got anythin' to say?"

Larb looked 'round upon the hard faces turned to his. Not much use appealing to them, he thought. Still—

"Some of you gents saw the shooting. I'd take it as a favor if some of you would speak up an' tell the sheriff who made the first move for a gun."

Larb, waiting for a reply, saw Atwood's smoky eyes flash 'round the ring of faces. No one spoke.

Larb's rough black brows arched upward. "Ought to hold a skunk show 'round here, sheriff. You sure got a heap of blue ribbon critters!"

Transferring the pistol to his left hand, the hook-nosed lawman of the Mojave clenched his right suggestively. "That'll be enough outa yuh," he snarled. "Keep a civil tongue between yore damn teeth or I'll sure as hell knock 'em out!"

"You ain't got guts enough," grinned Pecos Larb. "Not even with a gun in one hand an' your polecat friends standin' 'round three deep."

The sheriff's gray orbs smoldered. He growled out the corner of his mouth: "Know anythin' about this salty pilgrim, Hawk? Ever seen him any place before?"

Larb flashed a glance at the crooked rancher. Atwood's smoky eyes, regarding him reflectively, suddenly widened. A chill of warning flowed through Pecos Larb, but his iron will held his face like a wooden mask.

"Seems like I do sort of recall seein' him before," Atwood was saying in his thin, rasping voice. "Ask him what his name is, Blackie."

"You can call me Jingleboots," Larb said quietly, without waiting for the sheriff to repeat the question. "It ain't my real name, but I guess it will do in a pinch."

The rancher and the lawman exchanged looks. Atwood said: "Eighteen years ago, Blackie, there was a wild bunch of hell-raisin' hellions workin' this county. Their leader was a young lobo callin' himself Pecos Larb, a gun-shootin' fool if there ever was one. He got sent up for killin' a Mex sheepherder. Him an' this salty hairpin might easy be taken for brothers. In fact—" he grinned coldly—"I wouldn't be at all surprised if this gun-totin' buck ain't Pecos Larb himself!"

"By cripes!" the lawman slapped his thigh. "I reckon yuh hit the nail plumb center, Hawk! Lookit that pallor! It ain't natural for a outdoors man to be as pale as that—betcha that's prison pallor!"

Atwood, catching Larb's eyes upon his face, grinned faintly. "I shouldn't wonder if it was. If the Half Circle C has been raided today, I'll lay you ten to one that right here's the gent that did the raidin'. Blackie, I reckon you better arrest this wolf for murder. It's an open-and-shut case that he downed Cordo Mayne without givin' poor Cordo a Chinaman's chance."

Larb's satanic brows rose mockingly as one swift stride brought him close to the crooked rancher. "Reckon I owe you one for that, Hawk," he said, and his right fist drove to the angle of Atwood's jaw—sent him smashing back against the ring of gaping onlookers.

Larb heard a curse and a quick step behind him. Like a cat swapping ends he whirled. But too late. The hook-nosed lawman's raised pistol crashed down upon his head and Pecos Larb went to the floor in a burst of whirling lights.

PECOS LARB came blinking back to a most unsatisfactory world, with the low drone of muffled voices. He found that he was in jail and that the voices were coming from beyond the door leading into the sheriff's office—a door that was not quite closed. The voices belonged to Atwood and Blackie, the hook-nosed Mojave lawman. Blackie's thick bass was saying:

"But is it safe? We don't want no backlash from this job."

"Don't be a fool," came the exasperated voice of Hawk Atwood. "There ain't a chance of a slip-up. I'll feed the tough hairpins in this town all the liquor they can guzzle. You can have three-four men in the crowd protestin' at the injustice of us keepin' this Larb jasper in jail. That'll get things started. Play on their sympathies; talk about poor Cordo's wife an' six kids left fatherless at such tender age. Tell 'em anything that'll work 'em up. When the time's right have one of your men yell for a rope. The rest'll be easy as rollin' off a log."

"Yeah, but that ain't lettin' me out if an investigation should ever get started later," came the whining bass of Blackie. "Folks'll say I oughta defended the prisoner—oughta put up some kind of a fight. An' if I put up a bluff, it might scare the lynchers off."

"Don't worry about that part of it," snapped Atwood's voice. "Put up all the bluff you want. I'll see that the crowd snakes Larb out an' hangs him."

In his tiny cell Pecos Larb's cold eyes grew narrow. Pleasant jaspers! Atwood wasn't aiming to let any grass grow under his feet, looked like. Larb gingerly felt his lacerated scalp. It ached like hell and his hair, he found, was matted with dried blood. He tried to think. "Looks like it's up to me to do some right quick figurin' unless I'm aimin' to get my neck stretched!" he muttered softly.

"What about that Tyler filly?" Blackie was asking.

"I'll tend to her! I've stood for her high-an'-mighty tantrums all I'm goin' to. She'll marry me an' be damn glad of the chance 'fore I get through with her! I'll have a couple of the boys go out an' round up what's left of her cattle. If that don't force her my way, I'll figure somethin' else. But don't worry 'bout her puttin' up a squawk account of her old man gettin' bumped off. I'll see that she behaves!"

Larb's cheeks were awash with passion as he listened to the thin, leering voice of the crooked rancher. How he had ever been crazy enough to see anything admirable in such a two-legged skunk was a monumental mystery to him now. He had to get out of here—quick! Not only on his own account, but to save Tom Tyler's girl from the scheming machinations being hatched by that smoky-eyed devil in the room outside!

Suddenly he tensed as he caught the thread of the rancher's talk.

"Hell, yes! Of course I framed him. Some one had to be the goat. Things were getting too hot. I was afraid the governor might send down some special investigators to look into things. One of the boys murdered the Mex disguised to look kinda like Larb in the dark. We staged it near Tyler's and made plenty of noise so's Long Tom would be sure to come pokin' around. Had to have responsible identification so's to get a conviction."

"They don't make 'em any slicker'n you, Hawk," came Blackie's ingratiating whine.

"A fella's got to get up pretty early to beat me at my own game," Atwood chuckled as he and the sheriff passed out of the building.

"So that's the how-come Tyler thought I was the gent that killed that Mex," Larb growled, and his flinty, agate eyes glowed strangely. He sucked his breath in harshly and hot blood pounded at his temples. Hawk Atwood had framed him neatly!

One thing was plain: If he ever expected to even up accounts with the crooked rancher and save Ann Tyler from the man's evil designs, it was high time he was figuring a way to extract himself from his present predicament. Even now, he could hear loud talk from up the street where Blackie's agents were stirring up a mob.

Hands deep-shoved in his trousers pockets, Larb's eyes rested broodingly on the kerosene lamp bracketed to the wall outside his cell. Too damn bad it was out of reach. If he could upset that lamp it might create a diversion that would give him a chance to make a getaway. Desperate, of course; but only desperate measures could hope to succeed against the forces leagued against him.

He heard a door slam and booted feet clumped across the floor of the sheriff's office. He heard a chair creak as a bulky weight settled in it. Evidently Blackie, having got the ball to rolling, was preparing to spend the period of waiting in his office. It shouldn't take long with free liquor to work a crowd into a fine mood for a necktie party, Larb reflected grimly.

His right hand was twisting the matches in his pocket nervously. Blackie had taken his guns, but had not searched him. He began to wonder if those matches in his pocket couldn't be made to serve the same purpose as the unreachable coal-oil lamp?

"It's worth a try," he grunted. He had fourteen matches, he discovered upon examination of his pockets. The jail was an old frame building at the far end of town, and tinder dry from the three-months drought. The rough wooden ceiling was within reach, he found, by standing on his bunk. He was thankful the other cells were unoccupied.

The tight-pinched lips and lean square jaw of Pecos Larb showed determination, as, all fourteen matches gripped in his right hand, he struck them and held them close to the bone-dry wood above his head. A dark charred spot appeared, broke into tiny widening cracks and blazed. Greedily, with hungry fury the flames licked outward, spreading with a hiss and snapping crackle. Pecos Larb stepped off the bare bunk and leaned his lanky frame against the barred door to await developments.

SMOKE filled the rear of the jail rapidly as the flames gained headway. Larb stood the fierce heat and choking fumes as long as he could. "Fire! For the love of heaven let me out! Blackie!" he shouted. "The damn place has caught fire!"

Gasping, he peered through the bars into the smoke-filled corridor with streaming reddened eyes. Blackie came running with foul-mouthed curses, glared at Larb as he rammed the key into the door's lock with one hand while his other gripped a leveled pistol.

"Where the hell you been?" demanded Larb, coughing. "Tryin' to roast me alive?"

"I'd let yuh roast quick enough if I thought you started this damn fire!" Blackie snarled as he yanked the cell door open. "Keep yore hands stretched high or yuh'll get a bullet in yore guts!"

Larb lurched down the corridor toward the open door of the sheriff's office with the sheriff's gun prodding his back as a puncher prods a recalcitrant steer. "Got s'much smoke in my eyes I can't find the door!" gasped Larb, as they reached it.

"It's open, yuh damn—" the sheriff began, and broke off with the wind jarred out of him as Larb, suddenly dropping below that prodding gun, deflected it with his left elbow as his right fist buried itself in the sheriff's stomach—hard! Blackie Sledden doubled up with a painful grunt and lost all interest in his prisoner for the moment.

Larb wrenched the gun from his hand, jerked the gasping hook-nosed lawman to his feet and shoved him into the office, slamming the door behind him. Above the hissing crackle of the sweeping flames, he could hear the oaths and shouts and scuffling boots of running men. It was no time to linger where he was!

"Out the side door!" he rasped, and forced the cursing sheriff through before him. "Get into them shadows, damn you!"

"Hawk'll nail yore hide to the fence fer this!"

"In makin' rabbit stew—first catch your rabbit!" chuckled Larb, enjoying life immensely. This night bade fair to turn out rather interesting after all, he thought, as they dashed across the open. It was time he got himself a mount.

Reaching the deep shadows of a group of umbrella trees, he flashed a swift glance behind and saw a gesticulating mob of men surrounding the burning jail. "We're headin' for the heart of town," he told Blackie softly. "Keep to the rear of the buildings an' hit a lope!"

Though the burly sheriff seemed thoroughly cowed by the swift reversal of circumstances effected by Larb's quick thinking, Larb knew that he'd be getting crusty soon. He must get rid of Blackie at the earliest opportunity if he hoped to make good his escape and warn Ann Tyler of the deviltry afoot.

When they reached a building that resembled, as well as he could judge from the rear, the saloon in which he had been arrested, Larb ordered Blackie Sledden to halt. "Holt on, Blackie," he muttered. "Here—pick up that roll of bills!"

"Huh? Where?" gasped the slow-thinking lawman, stooping to peer among the shadows. "Where the devil are they?"

"Right here!" said Larb, and deliberately brought the barrel of his pistol down across the sheriff's hatless head. Blackie Sledden dug his hooked nose in the dust without a sound.

"Reckon that pays you back for that wallop you handed me in the Brass Rail!" said Larb, and chuckled as he made his way around the building to the street.

He found that he had guessed right. This was indeed the saloon in which he had encountered Cordo Mayne. Looking toward the hitchrack he saw his big roan. He saw more! A wide-shouldered man with a stoop was climbing into the saddle. Rushing forward, Larb caught him by the collar and dragged him down.

"What the hell's the big idea of gettin' aboard my horse?"

"Yore hoss!" the fellow began, when Larb saw his eyes go wide with startled recognition. "Pecos Larb!" he snarled, reaching for his gun.

Larb's flushed face, his narrowed steady eyes, did not change expression. Swinging his whole muscular body behind the arc of his striking fist, he smashed the fellow behind the ear. The man went down and stayed.

Stepping across him, Larb got one foot in the stirrup and a hand on the horn. When he settled in the saddle the big roan was pounding a dust cloud out of town at a dead run.

HE rode straight up to the only building left of the Tyler ranch headquarters. He saw no light save moonlight. Yet he stepped from the saddle and pounded the flimsy door with his gun butt.

"Who's there?" came Ann's firm cool voice.

"Pecos Larb," he answered. "Open up—I got to talk with you!"

"Your mistake. I don't palaver with killers. Now get away from that door, you scorpion, or I'll loose a load of buckshot!"

"I'm serious, Ann! I overheard somethin' in town you ought to know."

"I'm serious, too," came the uncompromising reply. "I don't know which is the worst—you or Hawk At-

wood! Get back on your horse and make tracks pronto! Otherwise I shoot!"

"I reckon you would, too," he reflected aloud, a scowl between his brows.

"You bet I would!"

"Shucks, girl—I'm tryin' to do you a favor," Larb pleaded.

"I don't want any favors from skunks of your stripe!" she snapped. "Git!"

With a snort of disgust, Pecos Larb jingled back to the roan and climbed aboard. "All right," he grunted. "I just hope Hawk Atwood makes good his brag!" And, with a shrug of indifference, Pecos Larb rode off.

He rode off—but not very far. Despite his outward show of indifference, he had no slightest intention of leaving Ann to the mercy of Atwood's machinations. Reaching the crest of the slope overlooking the Half Circle C, Larb dropped below the skyline and swung from the saddle. His enemies might have no idea of where to look for him. But the chances were, he thought, that Atwood would not let that fact interfere in any way with his plans for again raiding the Tyler ranch.

Locating a good-sized boulder, he sat down with the carbine across his lap and prepared to stay awake till the raiding party showed. Despite Ann's cavalier treatment of him, Pecos Larb was certainly not going to let Atwood have his way with her if he could help it. Besides, he had a score of his own to settle with the unscrupulous and predatory Hawk.

As it turned out, he did not have long to wait. Scarcely twenty minutes had passed when, speeding across the moonlit range, he beheld a number of black-clad horsemen. Abruptly half the group split off and went spurring north.

"They can have the cattle, for all of me," Larb muttered. "But they've got to go like hell to get that girl!"

He snuggled down against the boulder, resting his rifle across its top. He saw the half-dozen oncoming riders canter forward and surround the shack. A voice shouted something he failed to catch. The boom of a shotgun smote against his ears. He saw the masked horsemen spur hurriedly out of range, unlimber their rifles and open up on the shack wherein Ann crouched defiantly with the shotgun. He chuckled. "Shootin' the upper part of that shack to kindlin' wood. Doubt if they scare her out by any such fool stunt as that."

But they did. Abruptly the firing stopped as the door swung open and Ann stepped into view. Five masked horsemen drew in about her. The sixth, out of sight from the girl, but plain within Larb's view, whipped off his mask and came thundering around the shack with flashing spurs and flaming guns. It was, Larb saw, Hawk Atwood. At sight of him the outlaws scattered as though the devil himself were after them.

Larb decided it was time to take a hand in the show. "All right, Atwood!" he shouted. "Fork your bronc out along with the rest of your girl-scarin' badmen!"

HE could see Atwood stiffen at sound of his voice. He heard the curse that fell from his lips as he scooped Ann off her feet and dashed for his horse, yelling to his men. Then the departing riders whirled and came pounding back.

Larb raised his carbine and opened up. Down in the moonlit clearing a horse went hoofs over head, crushing his squealing rider beneath him. A second man reeled in his saddle, clutched the horn and went galloping off. Two more lost heart and fled as shouts, curses, and the crash of roaring guns filled the moonlit clearing with deafening clamor.

Larb flung himself into the saddle and sent the roan plunging down the slope.

"Drop that girl, you polecat!"

But if Atwood heard, he did not heed. Larb saw him spring to the sad-

dle, drag the struggling girl up in front of him and go spurring frantically for the desert. Two of his masked cohorts swung in behind.

Larb dared not fire for fear of hitting the girl. But the two masked men with Atwood, turning in their saddles, let loose a hail of lead. Larb hugged the roan's long neck and did not swerve. No matter what the cost, he was determined that the crooked rancher should not force Ann Tyler into marriage.

He saw one of the fleeing trio, unable to keep up the headlong pace, slowly drop behind. The fellow's mask had fallen and Larb recognized the fear-twisted face he turned behind as that of the hook-nosed Sheriff Sledden. He saw Sledden suddenly pull in his heaving mount, drop from the saddle and fling a rifle to his shoulder.

Larb ducked as flame spurted from its muzzle, swung low on the offside of the plunging roan, thrust his pistol beneath the horse's neck and squeezed the trigger. Sledden lurched to his feet, swayed and toppled forward as Larb went thundering past.

Larb, straightening in the saddle, saw the second man fling a look behind. He swerved the roan's course as the outlaw opened fire in a frenzied attempt to knock him from his horse. One slug tore a whining course through the crown of his hat. The rest went wild.

A cold grin curled Larb's lips as he saw the fellow whirl his mount and, using quirt and spurs, attempt to get away. The fellow was now out of line with the fleeing Atwood and the girl. Sheathing his pistol, Larb yanked the carbine from its scabbard and slapped it to his shoulder. It coughed but once. Squealing horse and cursing rider crashed down in a cloud of dust.

Larb swung the roan after the slowing Hawk who was belaboring his winded mount unmercifully. His eyes narrowed to blazing agates as he saw Atwood jerk his horse to a skidding stop, saw him spring from the saddle, dragging the still struggling Ann with him.

As he swept down upon him, Larb saw Atwood throw the girl in front of him, hand dragging at his Colt. Flame belched from his hip as Larb left the saddle, lit on skidding boot heels, dashed forward in a zig-zag crouch. The first slug ripped at Larb's hat. The second tugged at his vest. The third scorched across his left shoulder, throwing him out of stride. Then Larb's big pistol was in his hand, throwing lead across the interval as Hawk, desperate, thrust the struggling girl aside.

Larb saw cold fury in Hawk's smoky gaze. For a long moment he stood motionless; a sinister, rocklike figure of burning hate. Then he seemed to choke and his gaunt body pitched face down in the yellow dust.

Pecos Larb felt a hand on his arm and turned. It was Ann, and her pale-green eyes were pleading. "What you came to the ranch to tell me—would —would you care to tell me now?"

"Of course," Larb answered quietly, hungry gaze on her lovely face. In a few words he explained what had happened in town and what he had overheard between Blackie and Atwood. "I'd like to apologize," he finished, "for what I thought and said about your dad."

"I guess you couldn't help feeling the way you did—Pecos. And I'm sorry I called you the things I did. I —I was a little fool, I guess. I—"

"I love you," Larb muttered huskily, and his strong arms drew her close. "Reckon I've always loved you, Ann."

With tear-bright eyes she pressed her lips to his.

Rangeland Action Novelette

By Edgar L. Cooper

GUN STORM ON

They branded him a saddle bum gone loco with luck—this range tumbleweed whose only monicker was "Hornet". But when a left-handed law called a trigger turn, Hornet played another game of chance—a gun game of hot hell on wheels.

HURRICANE PEAK

CHAPTER I

HORSESHOE LUCK

THE swart and opaque-eyed Palace croupier watched the whirring ball circle slower and slower, and in an expectant sort of silence click into the four slot. Four and the red, while a gust of talk and ribald cheers swept around the table from the group surrounding its wheel. And the impassive features of the house game creased into a tiny frown as he shoved one thousand and eight hundred dollars from the bank across the hand-polished board—shoved it with a wooden rake toward the youthful nondescript who had placed two hundred bucks on a combination of fours.

"'At's makin' the old kitty talk, kid!" chuckled a bystander who had followed the youngster's bet to quite some advantage. "Twist the wampus' tail this time!"

"Stick with me," grinned the kid, "and you'll win the fur-lined pot!" He downed a sizable bet on the odd as he spoke, with a light-flung jest at the croupier, who chose not to hear.

Plug Jeffries, the floor man, watching the game from the fringe of the crowd, chewed his mangled cheroot and scowled blackly at the wasp-bodied drifter who was fast wrecking the Palace roulette bank.

It killed the burly bruiser's soul to see a patron winning lucky gold in his employer's house games, and only added insult to injury when that patron was so obviously just a raggedy-rumped tumbleweed hardly dry behind the ears yet. Here he was, raking in hundreds of dollars by blind beginner's luck, laughing at his good fortune, cheerfully advising his neighbors to ride the ball with him, and get rich quick.

Plug cursed, turned on his heel and started wading through the crowd toward a door marked "Private" at the rear end of the long bar. Something damned shore was gonna hafta be done about this!

The Palace Bar & Casino was no ordinary, run-of-the-range place. It was large, sumptuous and mirrored. A luxury far above the level of Sandoval County. Hardwood bar, crystal chandeliers, glassy dance floor, with an eight-piece Mex orchestra and a bevy of as pretty girls found west of Kansas City. Oil paintings of stage beauties and prize fighters marched along the walls, with here and there an elk head or a war bonnet or an ox yoke. And the Palace boasted every sort of gaming paraphernalia which catered to the desire of men.

It was the boast of Big Sam Brimhall, proprietor, that no braked wheels or shady games went in his establishment; and strange to say, the games *were* honest. Even strang-

er, this outward show of things fooled ninety-nine out of a hundred customers and townsmen of his, as did Brimhall's suave, polished front. As a result, his word was law to a great many people in the town of Alamitos and surrounding territory.

So, ploughing through the press to the door tagged "Private," Plug Jeffries banged upon the panels. He identified himself, and a moment later was admitted into the bolted chamber by a tall, broad-shouldered man of swarthy countenance and blunt jaw, who wore a fifty dollar beaver and twin cutters with inlaid gold handles.

"Look what the cat drug in." Topeka Bolt, city marshal of Alamitos, grinned lazily at Plug as he relocked the door and turned toward the table where Big Bill Brimhall sat in an easy chair behind a shaded lamp. Plug Jeffries looked at him from an equal height, grunted, and helped himself to Bolt's chair at the table's corner.

"What's on your mind, big boy?" Brimhall asked genially. "Something besides your hair?"

"Yeh," growled Plug. "The's a bird out yonder that sumpin's gotta be done about."

BRIMHALL, toying with a pencil, regarded his house man evenly, unperturbed. He was a big man, as big as Jeffries or the marshal, but made softer than either by easy living—with a skin olive in color and a poker face; black-mustached and black hair touched with gray at the temples. His garb was expensive, his manner polished and hard as a diamond.

Cold as ice and wholly ruthless, Bill Brimhall nurtured the lust for power behind his smoothly handsome exterior, and took great pride in his character rôle of a desert Warwick. He didn't change expression at Plug's announcement, but merely yawned and said:

"Why didn't you bounce him out, then, instead of telling me?"

"That's what I was comin' to, boss. He ain't doin' nuttin' but jimming the wheel, but he's bustin' the spokes plenty—what I mean. Just a tramp bum, yeh. Crazy wit' luck. Must pack rabbit feet and horseshoes in every pocket—and good Palace long green crammed tight on top of 'em. Hit the kitty for eighteen hunnerd the last flip."

"H'm-m." Brimhall regarded the glowing tip of his cigar, then looked at the beefy, scarred visage of his floorman. "Just what sort of jigger did you say this white-haired lad is, now?"

"Nuttin' but a bum gone loco with luck," spat Plug. He folded his right hand into a hamlike fist, looked at it a second. "Ast him his handle, an' he called hisself Hornet."

Big Bill's eyes contracted ever so little. "Hornet, eh? Seems I've heard that same name somewhere," he mumbled thoughtfully.

"Mebbe," said Plug. "But you never heard it about *him!* He ain't nuttin' but a range tramp wit' goofy eyes an' curly hair, havin' a crazy run of luck. Ain't never showed in here before—"

"Goofy eyes?" Big Bill's voice was still thoughtful. "Just what do you mean by that, Plug?"

"Goofy I mean," repeated Jeffries. "They ain't the same color. One's a kind o' blue, the other'n sorta gray-like. They slant kinda like a Chink's, too. He can't be more'n nineteen—twenty at most."

Brimhall looked at Topeka Bolt, who leaned idly against the wall smoking a cigarette, listening. The marshal shook his head with a shrug. No, he didn't recognize anybody of that description.

"Well," said Big Bill at last, "that's your job, Plug. Maybe Topeka's also. If he's a drifting bum, why—throw his rump in the calaboose for vagrancy."

"For vag?" echoed Plug. "Hell, boss, and him lousy wid house jack? That damn ole goat-whiskered Judge Peay would rare straight up—"

"Who said anything about His Honor, the city magistrate?" purred Big Bill smoothly. "He won't need to be bothered by vagrancy charges. Fix things so this lucky lad with the mismated eyes will be glad enough to fan out of town. If I know you two, a minute after he's pinched he won't have any pocketful of dinero. What am I paying you both for, anyhow? To use your brains for you?"

The two-gun marshal's eyes glinted as he nodded. "Fair enough. Fifty-fifty, eh?"

Brimhall nodded in turn. "Better tag along, Plug," he added, carelessly. "Two might do a better job than one. Come back and tell me about it, after a while."

"We'll come back wit' sumpin' more than talk," said Jeffries, heaving to his feet. Despite his weight he moved like a cat, pad-footed. And Topeka Bolt stepped out with a similar movement. Two big men, very confident of themselves and their prowess, packing the punch and capability of full-grown grizzlies, and one wearing the star of authority.

Big Bill Brimhall smiled complacently as the door closed behind them. He could afford to run straight games in the Palace, with these two henchmen at beck and call. His right and left bowers, who could be trusted to shake down heavy winners on the q.t., by devious and dark and canny methods, with no blame attached to them—or himself. They knew how to manage things, Plug and Topeka did, with no back-kick.

For a moment Brimhall scowled a little at his cigar end, vainly trying to recall the connection that name of "Hornet" stirred in his memory. Then he forgot the matter with a grin and shrug as he turned back to his account book, his pencil absently tracing little figures and curlicues on the margin, and none of them having the slightest bearing upon the business in which he was at the moment engaged.

The habit was something Big Bill Brimhall never gave a thought to; it was wholly automatic with him. And it is just from such tiny acorns that great oaks grow.

THE Mexican orchestra was going full swing, the dance floor crowded with miners and punchers and prospectors, the clink of glasses and surf of talk rising loud, when Plug Jeffries and Topeka Bolt came into the barroom. And the growing crowd around the roulette table testified to the fact that the young drifter who called himself Hornet still bucked the game and his amazing luck still held.

The two minions of Big Bill didn't head directly for the wheel—nothing so crude as that was their method. Plug sifted off through the crowd, chewing his cheroot; Bolt lounged to the bar and ordered a drink, jesting with several acquaintances. To all appearances he'd never even noticed the young fellow at the wheel.

But under cover of his drink and conversation he studied Hornet narrowly, and a glance sufficed to tell him that he'd never seen the kid before. A slender, waspish sort of maverick, with a sharp young face under rusty hair that curled crisply. And Plug had described his eyes exactly —one blue, one hazel—and both slightly slanting. His hands were slim and tapering and supple, with extra large knuckles; his teeth flashed white and even in the dark tan of his visage.

Topeka Bolt smiled slightly, knowingly. Drifter was right—a damned range tumbleweed. Coatless, his flannel shirt faded and his corduroys slick and worn; a lopsided hat that spoke eloquently of much use in fanning fires and dipping water sat rakishly atop his head. No tobacco

sack bulged his shirt pocket; no six-shooter or stingy gun adorned his person. Mama's boy, thought the marshal—a set-up. But his pockets lumped thick with house-bank dinero. And even as Bolt watched, the kid raked in a five hundred buck win.

"Must be five, six thousand ahead," the barkeep told Topeka in an undertone. "Never seen such a streak of luck—horseshoe luck."

Topeka grinned thinly, tightly, as he refilled his glass. For from the corner of his eye he saw Plug strolling away from the side entrance, and a shadowy figure recognized as Panzo Boyd just fading into outer darkness. Briefly meeting Plug's eye, Topeka saw a meaning grin flit across Jeffries' gross, broken-nosed face.

The marshal kept a weather eye upon the front doors, watching for Panzo's appearance. But the next visitor to the Palace wasn't the burly young thug Topeka expected. Bolt's eyes narrowed, his face grew very still and grim as he stared at the newcomer, recognizing him instantly. For Jim Free, U. S. Deputy Marshal, was a well-known character all through the Sandoval and Blue Hills mining country.

Grizzled as a badger, squatty and bowlegged, his face the hue of burned saddle leather, Jim Free squinted challengingly about the room as he clumped high-heeled to the bar and ordered liquor. He scanned the patrons with deep-set eyes, gray as new steel and twice as hard. A hard-bitted oldster whose rep as a gunhawk and hunter of men was legend all over the Territory and Texas Panhandle.

Probably here on that Quintana stage job, reflected Bolt—or about the Red Mesa postoffice robbery. Maybe both. Crimes generally blamed in the Sandoval country to Black Jack Horrel and his gang, whose supposed hangout was up in the Agua Poquita malpais. A crew of owl-hooters whose rampages had been much in evidence of late throughout the cow and mine country below the Cimarrones.

Topeka Bolt was thoughtfully twisting a cigarette, his mouth compressed, when young Panzo Boyd came swaggering through the front entrance, the stub of quirly between his lips wafting behind him a sharp, herbal odor. Several patrons turned to eye him askance, for the scent of his cigarette was unmistakably that of marihuana mixed with tobacco.

Bolt became more relaxed and unobservant, knowing that his cue was almost ready. Plug Jeffries, standing well away from the roulette table, was elaborately casual and disinterested. Jim Free, buying a cigar at the front counter, apparently hadn't noticed Boyd's entrance. But Topeka, well knowing the old manhunter, wished that he hadn't strolled in just when he did. Not that this would be any of his business, however. Still—

Panzo wasn't long in starting the ruckus for which he'd been primed by Plug Jeffries. The burly young ruffian, inflamed by the loco weed just enough to be meanly vicious, shouldered rudely into the circle of gamers until he stood beside the kid called Hornet. And the wheel hadn't spun twice before he made opportunity to engage in dispute with the lucky youth about the placing and ownership of a bet.

In short, Panzo attempted to jump a pile of Hornet's winnings on a fortunate combination, claiming the bet as his own.

"You sissy-faced shorthorn!" snarled Panzo. "I'll bust you in two! Git yore lily whites off'n my dinero, hear me?"

"You must be mistaken, friend," came Hornet's soft answer. "This happened to be my wager. Croupier will tell you that, and these men—"

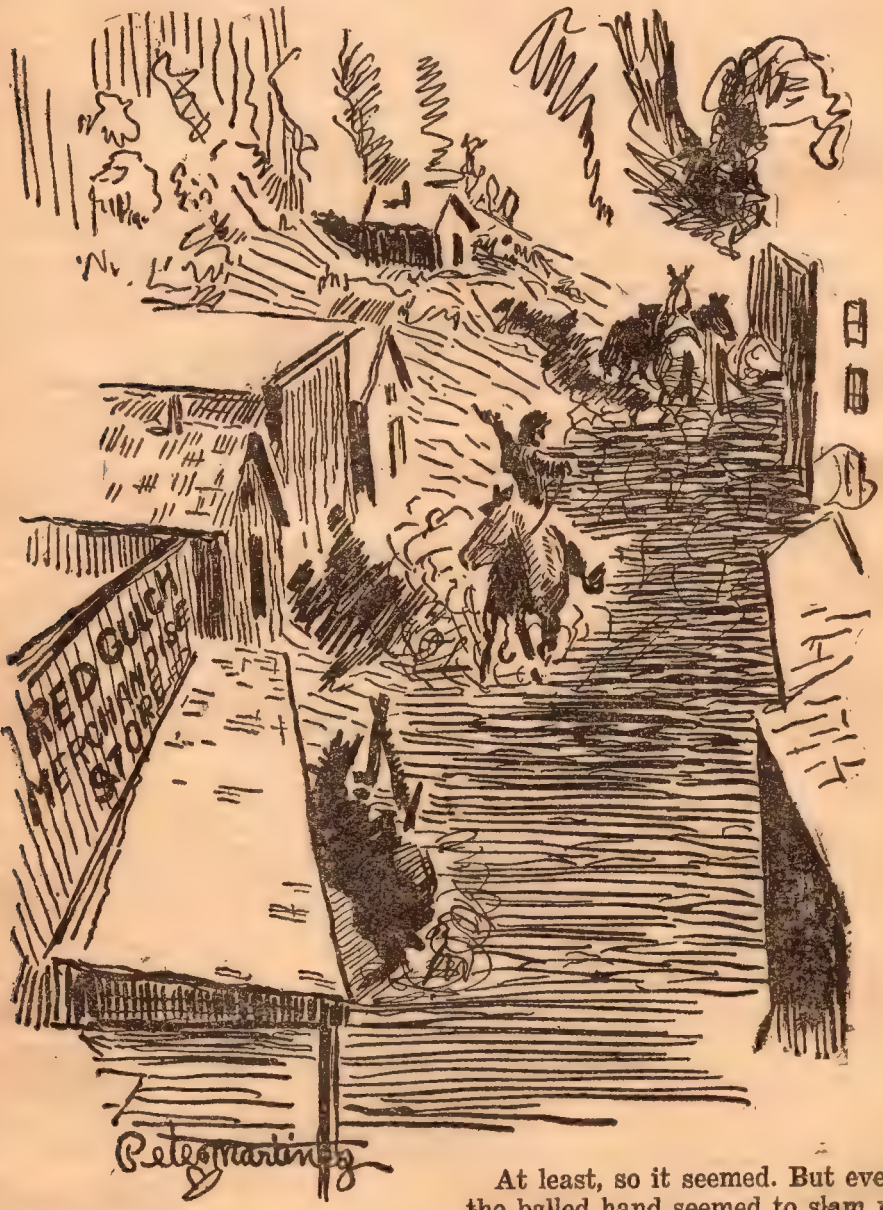
"Yeh?" Panzo thrust his ugly face into the kid's. "*They're* tellin' me nothin', savvy? Git to hell away from here, you—"

The cords on his thick neck stood out, his visage was contorted, as he spewed obscene profanity upon the

kid's rusty head. The players about the board fell back, well knowing Panzo's brutal proclivities and not caring to have any of it. They'd seen more than one hapless fellow taste Boyd's fists and boots; he'd had plenty experience in rough-and-tumble wrestling and fighting, with no holds barred. And being hopped up on marihuana tonight, too, made him twice as savage.

"Git going, you so-and-so tramp!" Panzo finished thickly. "Mebbe thi'll start you on yore way—"

And without warning, like a rattler's strike, he suddenly drove his fist into the face of the kid.



At least, so it seemed. But even as the balled hand seemed to slam right through the face of the slender youngster who was the target, Hornet somehow flicked his head to one side. And as Panzo barged forward with a grunt of wasted effort, slightly off

balance, Hornet's left arm flashed out and up in apparent awkwardness to land flush upon the nose of Panzo Boyd. It looked like an accidental lick, but every watcher there saw Boyd's bushy cranium jar backward at the impact.

WITH a roar Panzo whirled, flailed in with both fists, trying not only for a haymaker but also to get his iron clutch upon this slim antagonist, whom he outweighed thirty pounds. But although the kid's movements seemed stumbling and uncertain, and his manner that of one who doesn't know what it's all about, he managed to evade Panzo's punches and grabbing hands. Then he landed a trio of short jabs to Boyd's face which felt to that worthy like some one slamming him with solid sections of lead pipe without masks of rubber hose.

Stars that never twinkled in the Palace showered before Boyd's eyes, and myriads of many-hued constellations. But through the millrace of his ears and reeling riot of his brain, Panzo felt his taloned fingers contact his foe.

He laughed drunkenly, deep in his throat, as his thick-ribbed body struck that of Hornet and bore the lighter battler backwards. Laughed profanely as his thick-muscled arms secured a bone-crushing grip around the kid's body—a bear grip that would stave in ribs and crack them like matches. The bystanders groaned, for they knew what was coming; knew what a bestial devil Panzo Boyd was when he had an opponent in his power. And he had the kid by the short hairs, now!

For a moment it appeared so. But just when several spectators were turning away, not caring to stomach the dirty work sure to follow, a concerted gasp from those remaining jerked them about. For Panzo, amazement and rage charged with sudden pain stamped all over his face, was losing his death clutch. His left arm seemed queerly limp and paralyzed —nerveless, even, as it dangled at his side.

None saw the lick which caused it. Panzo felt it high on his biceps before that member went dead and the grip in which he'd been so secure broke. Gasping, he smashed for Hornet's head with his right—and felt something like a combined whiplash and club land on the left side of his neck, just where it joined the head.

Panzo staggered, eyes going blank. Numbness ran down his spine like some poisonous fluid, making water of his knees, muddling every sense. And as Panzo Boyd abruptly sat down his was one final glimpse of a tanned sharp face, minus any stain of battle, regarding him with a faint, derisive smile. One glimpse, before fire-shot darkness came down like some whirling pinwheel before his vision.

In the midst of this furore came the city marshal, striding very purposefully. Also came Plug Jeffries, shoving people right and left. The fight had lasted almost less time than takes the telling; their intervention didn't seem overlate. Plug reached down and hauled the wobbly Panzo to his feet, and there was nothing gentle in the act. Topeka, a hard grin edging his lips, placed a gentler hand on the kid's shoulder, and young Hornet looked at Topeka with polite query.

"Show's over," Bolt said genially. "I want you, fella."

"Want me?" Hornet's mismatched eyes widened. "For what? Do you arrest people in Alamitos for defending themselves?"

"Not any," grinned the marshal. "You're tagged for something else, kid. Reckon you savvy—if not, you'll find out at the office. I've had the finger on you ever since you hit town. You coming peaceable, or want to wear the cuffs?"

"No need for those," said the kid. He seemed very bewildered with all this; gazed helplessly about. "I'll come quiet, of course. Only—"

Topeka started Hornet toward the back door. "On your way, kid," he said without rancor. "Your 'onlys' will keep till jail-house, then you can tell me all about 'em!"

Plug Jeffries, who had dumped Panzo unceremoniously out a side exit, stalked back, dusting his hammy hands. "Git that bum outa here, Bolt!" he rumbled. "We got no time for his kind, not whatever."

"Keep your shirt on, Plug. We're going. Want to come see what we do?" Topeka winked brazenly at the Palace bouncer. As he half turned he happened to catch the cold eye of old Jim Free, watching from his stance at the bar. The grizzled lawman grinned frostily and wholly without amusement.

"This here wouldn't be because the younker was winnin', would it now, Bolt?" he asked with bleak irony. "Or nothin' like that?"

"Nothing," said Topeka casually. But he said it through teeth set so hard that the jaw muscles bulged, then he pushed Hornet along. Plug, hearing, squinted quickly at Free, then at the marshal, as he tagged behind with a scowl twisting his face. What the hell was that old vinegaroon horning in for!

He quickened his steps, ears keened for sounds behind him. None knew better than he that a mining crowd is never gentle, never dull-witted. That drawled comment of old Free's could easily prod them the wrong way, provoke anger and even interference if they figured his hint as authentic. As Jeffries and Bolt reached the back door with the prisoner Plug let out a sigh of gusty relief, then closed the portal behind him.

But the crowd inside didn't follow. After all, arrests were common in Alamitos, and Topeka Bolt's rep as a hard 'un well known.

CHAPTER II

SANDOVAL SIDEWINDERS

THE two bowers of Bill Brimhall didn't hesitate outside the rear door of the Palace. With the kid between them they walked fast and purposefully toward an adjacent corral. The voices and music inside were muted now, behind a stout wall; the night noises of a mining country came clear through the mountain air. Clink of drills, thump of stamps, the deep rumble of heavy loaded wagons.

Near the shadowy corral the trio halted. Topeka, firmly holding the boy's arm, nodded to Plug. "Fan him, feller. And don't overlook anything."

Jeffries grunted, stepped close. His piggy eyes glinted with hungry expectation. "Don't you worry none 'bout *that*. He'll be clean as picked kioty bones when I'm t'ru' wit' him."

The moon, white as a disk of ice high in mid-heaven, went under a cloud, wind driven, so suddenly that it seemed to have been blotted out. One moment its light had painted the three, the next they were in dark shadow. Plug, one hamlike hand thrust into the kid's pocket, chuckled coarsely at the thick feel of a stuffed wallet.

"I'll give 'im a start in a minute," he said to Topeka. "Start him out of town so fast this here empty hip pocket will dip up sand—"

Neither Topeka Bolt nor Plug Jeffries was ever very certain as to what happened next. Not even certain when afterward they talked the matter over in strictest privacy, bewilderedly wondering what the hell.

For Plug suddenly felt a Missouri mule kick him in the groin; land a wallop that made him go instantly sick and blind with sheer agony. With a strangled groan he dropped like a felled ox dragging Hornet away from

Topeka with the tug of the hand in Hornet's pocket. Stumbling awkwardly, the kid tripped over Plug's torso and somehow managed to fling a deft heel against the big bruiser's chin which wholly completed the stunning process. Jeffries immediately lost all interest in the shakedown as his head snapped backwards.

Startled, the marshal started a pile-driving blow at the kid's head with his right, still clinging to Hornet's right arm with his other hand. The wind of that punch seemed literally to fan Hornet back on his heels as it absorbed thin air alone. The next eye-wink the kid struck with the precision and lightning speed of a cougar's paw—with the cleaver edge of his palm, flush at the base of Topeka Bolt's skull.

The marshal, with a curious sort of gasp, sagged like wilting lettuce in a hot sun. His head flopped to one side like a sunflower drops when struck by a stick, his hold on Hornet's arm loosed abruptly. A shove, a tripping foot, and Topeka Bolt went down with violent impetus upon his pal and comrade, Plug Jeffries.

Some several seconds later the pair untangled themselves, slowly sat up. The happening had been some nightmare, one of those things that just can't be real. One minute that kid had stood there, loose hands hanging at his sides, blinking and bewildered, so paralyzed by fear that he was even unable to talk. The next clear recollection that was Topeka's and Plug's was that they were alone, quite alone under the moon and stars, seated on the ground near the corral and gazing foggily at one another.

They may have heard somewhere of footwork like fluttering leaves in high wind; they might possibly sometime have read of ju-jutsu, and those seemingly light cleaver blows with the rim of the palm, hard and seasoned, that could instantly paralyze muscles and nerves and brain. But before this night neither of them had seen the science demonstrated, nor did they know in the slightest what it was or what happened.

They only knew that they sat there, alone beneath the Sandoval sky, with the pealing of bells and tumbling of waterfalls in their ears and mighty sore spots on their anatomy. And worst of all, when their numbed faculties began responding to natural thought processes, both found themselves quite unarmed and all their artillery missing.

Missing—along with that baby-faced kid who called himself Hornet.

Slowly Topeka got to his feet, rubbing the back of his neck exploringly and gingerly as he twisted his head. Plug regained hands and knees, then his feet by aid of the corral bars, teetering unsteadily with one hand pressed to his belly. His face was sickly of hue and beaded with sweat; words choked in his throat. Bolt stared at him, blinking.

"This," he said at length, "ain't easy to take, Plug."

"Naw," croaked Plug painfully. "Naw, it ain't. No more'n dinnamite, or lightnin', or arsenic. Yuh know, feller, that 'cept when I started fannin' him, an' you helt his arm, we ain't neither of us laid a hand on that son? Slicker'n owl grease, he is."

"Yeah," nodded Topeka. "Poisonous slick. Something's got to be done about that young gent. Walking off with my guns this way!"

"Sumpin's gonna be done," rasped Plug. "I'm gonna crack him wide open—doin' us thisaway, and him not even heeled! I hate to think what Big Bill's gonna say when he hears—"

The marshal leaned a hand against the corral bars and stared gloomily into the night. "Yeah," he repeated. "I wonder what Bill's going to say, Plug. It won't be nice."

"Not none," Plug agreed bleakly. "Where'n hell did that hairpin sneak off to, y'reckon?"

THEY wouldn't have had to search very far, for a fact. For young Hornet hadn't gone any far-

ther than the side wall of the Palace Bar & Casino. After quickly glancing about to make sure he was no object of special attention, he walked lightly and silently up the flight of outside steps which led to a second floor given over to offices and living quarters of various Brimhall adherents.

Lightly as a spook he flitted down the central hall, past closed doors on either side, until he reached a door at the far end which gave onto a much larger room occupying the whole back end of the second floor. Busying himself a bare moment with a curious contraption which looked like a combination of can-opener, ice pick and skeleton key with various copper wires thrown in for good measure, he clicked the lock of the door. Then he slid inside through a crack just big enough for his slender body to enter.

Squatting low, Hornet chanced a match to orient himself, then felt a sure way in the dark toward an adjoining door in the west wall of what appeared to be a sort of office. Finding it unlocked, he eased into the next room, which a second match disclosed as sleeping quarters, and well furnished at that. Far beyond the usual run, that room. Big Bill Brimhall evidently liked ease, and did himself well in the way of bodily comforts.

Moving a goatskin rug, Hornet located a crack in the floor and cautiously started to work with a razor-bladed knife. Voices in the room beneath masked any slight sound the cutting might have made as Hornet's blade ate into the floor like a drill bit. In no time at all he'd reached the ceiling below, carefully enlarged a slit ample for spying and eavesdropping purposes. Tucking away the wood shavings in a pocket, Hornet flattened himself to look and listen.

Brimhall's Palace office, behind that door marked "Private," lay directly under him. And Big Bill himself sat behind his desk, gazing very steadily and very thoughtfully at the glum countenances of Topeka Bolt and Plug Jeffries.

The Palace boss was far from being anybody's fool, even in his rôle of the desert Warwick. He had a good idea of his own ability, and was a shrewd judge of the abilities of others. He had hand-picked the two before him with a knowledge of theirs. That a presumable tramp drifter handled both of these tough jiggers called for a bit of studious thought.

And Brimhall *was* thinking hard and pointedly as he regarded them, the fingers of his right hand absently tracing designs upon a sheet of paper at his elbow. Somewhere along his backtrail that name Hornet tickled a chord of memory, but the remembering of the connection eluded him with mocking vagary, worried him like a loose tooth.

"I expect," he said at long last, "that we had better send a message. Jim Free turning up here, and all—"

"Sense talks there, as usual," nodded Topeka Bolt, relievedly. "I'll pass the word to Roybal. About two-thirty, huh?"

"Two-thirty," assented Brimhall. "See that you don't waterhaul on *this*, Topeka!"

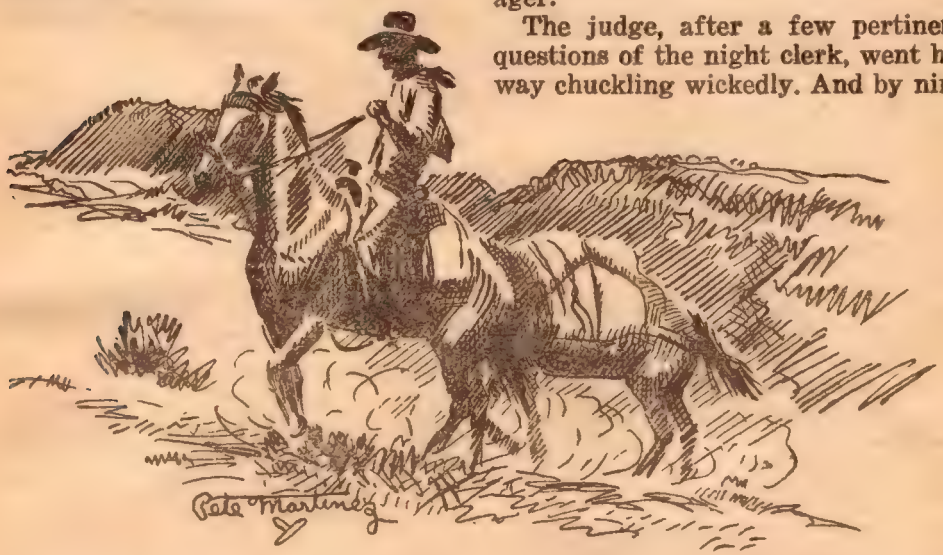
The marshal cursed. "I'll be seeing that young feller some more, Bill. Plenty."

Hornet, eye glued to his crack, eased to hands and knees, on upright. He hadn't been watching the Palace boss when Brimhall gave that final admonition to his marshal. His mismated eyes had been telescopically fastened, keen as a falcon's, upon the piece of paper upon which Big Bill had been tracing his aimless squares and curlicues and scribbles.

And a strangely grim smile of triumph curled the Hornet's lips as he quietly let himself out the hallway door. Locking it, he faded on feline feet along the corridor.

NO one saw Hornet enter Alamitos in the dusk of that yesterday, nor could any man say from which direction he had appeared. But when the night was over and sunrise brought another day to the Sandoval town, the signs of his brief but hectic nocturnal sojourn in their midst were glaringly apparent to every denizen of Alamitos.

Standing out like a sore thumb was the queer exhibit in the show window of the Lane & Peay Mercantile store, an establishment supplying its customers with everything from a needle to a freight wagon, and featuring in its stock a most complete choice of firearms. And the Peay of that partnership was Judge Luke Peay, local magistrate, whose office and abode were in dingy quarters above the store. An irascible old gent was the judge, whose liberal interpretations of the law were backed by a willingness to shoot it out with anybody who objected to them.



Likewise, his frank and outspoken dislike of Bill Brimhall and Topeka Bolt were matters of public gossip—an animosity very mutually shared. It happened to be Hizzoner, who breakfasted habitually early at the nearby Bon Ton Café, who first discovered the strange exhibit adorning the show window of the store.

Three guns stood prominently displayed there—two pearl-handled cutters with inlaid gold handles, .45 caliber; and a blunt-nosed .38 with crisscrossed stock. Beneath them was a big placard stating that a certain individual known as Hornet had left them there, and whoever claimed same could have their guns back by identifying them to the store manager.

The judge, after a few pertinent questions of the night clerk, went his way chuckling wickedly. And by nine o'clock every hombre in Alamitos had clustered there to look at the guns. And every looker knew, without reading tea leaves, to whom those two inlaid .45's belonged. Not only that, they were asking questions as to how one Hornet had gotten hold of them, and some several witnesses were recounting that arrest in the Palace of last night.

As to Hornet's whereabouts, no one knew. He'd disappeared as completely as he had showed up, no man knowing whither. Judge Peay, in a rawhide-bottomed chair with feet propped on the window ledge, chewed his tobacco cud and watched the throng without through sly, derisive eyes. He listened to the stream of questions flung at the night clerk, who answered all and sundry that a

young stranger who merely named himself Hornet had brought them there late, stating he'd found them and likely their owners would be calling around for same.

Very strangely, the faces of Topeka Bolt and Plug Jeffries were missing from the curious. Strange, because both had been notified of the exhibit, promptly and more than once. Both had slept late, and this news upon awakening didn't add any to their joy and comfort.

"If I hafta swim rivers and climb mountains all the rest of my life," gritted Plug, "I'm gonna make chili meat outa that slicker! If he had nine lives—I'd want all of 'em! Puttin' our guns in the winder thataway for ev'rybody tuh stare at!"

"Everybody but us," added the marshal between his teeth. "But where in hell and high water did this what's-his-name fan out to? None of the boys can get a smell of him. He just—*went*. Don't anybody know anything about him! Ain't Bill got any notion?"

"Mebbe," growled Plug. "But not no good one. He can't remember. Anyhow, 'twas a good idea—his gittin' that tip off up north this morning by Roybal. If this here Hornet oughta be known, well—they'll know!"

"Yeah—B. J. will know. As well as he'll be tipped that old Free is hanging around. I didn't like what he said to me last night about that kid, feller. He said it plumb nasty."

"Uh-huh. I didn't like it, neither. Nor I don't like *him*. No more than I like his showin' up here right now like he did."

"Just snoopin'," Bolt said with a confidence he did not feel. "Rootin' around for clues like a damned javelina hog, that's all."

BUT if the two disgruntled conspirators could have observed Jim Free around two-thirty that morning, they would have needed much more than uneasy self-assurances to qualm their disquiet. For in the covert of a mesquite and chaparral clump just beyond the town's outskirts, the grizzled federal deputy hunkered beside a dim trail, cold but vigilant, waiting for an expected tap of hoofs.

With him was young Hornet, recounting in low voice the events of earlier night and results of his prowling. A bleak grin fleeted across the old mustanger's visage as he listened.

"They musta been surprised—Plug an' Topeka," he commented tonelessly. "Surprised plumb considerable."

"They did seem disappointed," Hornet agreed. "And a little hurt."

Free grunted. "I reckon. But if yore notion about them doodabs an' initials Bill Brimhall was drawin' absent-mindedlike on the sheet of paper is kerrect, whilst yuh were eavesdroppin'—well, kid, the hombre yuh'r aimin' to tackle next won't be ary Plug or Topeka, I c'n tell yuh that! He won't give you no time to work shenanigans. Jack Horrel generally covers his tracks with the handiest thing around—somethin' red an' wet, usual."

"So I've heard. Oh, well! *Quién sabe?* I'm pretty certain that Brimhall let the cat out of the bag while he was cussing Plug and Bolt tonight. By scratching on that paper, and not realizing he did it. Lots of times what you're actually thinking gets into those figures, without you knowing it. And there were a couple of letters thrown in for good measure, tonight. The B. J. I was tellin' you about. Those gave him away."

"Could be," the deputy said at last. "Dang it, kid, if I didn't *know* yuh like I do, or if I didn't savvy how these hunches of your'n 'uv worked out, by thunder, I'd swear you oughta be in an asylum for the insane! Or else stuck with the stage, where yuh come from!"

"You know better, amigo," chuckled Hornet. "This beats stage tricks all to pieces. Even if I do say so my-

self, you and I make a fairish sort of team, eh?"

"Won't much longer," growled Free, "if yuh're still aimin' to ride into Blackjack Horrel's den of sidewinders without ary shootin' iron. Not even *you* could squirm or eel outa that set-up, kid. It ain't sense."

"That's just it," Hornet pointed out gently. "Horrel will be surprised, and likely no little puzzled. My luck will do the rest."

"Humph." Old Free's voice was bleakly grim as he finished: "Luck is a mirage, kid, that'll hang a feller sooner or later. Mostly danged sooner. When yuh need it most it won't be there."

Hornet's answer was silenced by the soft tap of approaching hoofs on the brush trail. "That will be our Mexican friend Roybal, I fancy," he said instead. "Carrying the message to Garcia. Be set in case I mess up the play, amigo."

"Yuh won't," shrugged Jim Free. "But I'll sleeve-ace you, kid."

A moment later the shadowy horseman cantered into sight down the path, humming softly to himself. And as he passed the chaparral covert a figure flashed through the air as if jumping from a spring, landing behind the cantle like a cougar. Before the startled spig could claw out his knife, a hard sinewy arm coiled about his throat and jerked him backward over his mount's rump, slamming his body hard against the ground to knock the breath out of him.

"Good hunting, so far," chuckled Hornet to Jim Free, who was busy with the plunging horse. "Soon as friend Roybal gets his breath a little, he's going to tell us things. Easy picking, wasn't he?"

"A tame house pussy," the old officer replied. "But Horrell is a wildcat. A pant'er with brains better than his claws, even. You wouldn't 'uv fooled Jack none with that trick, not any. He'd 'a' cut you in two—in midair. He's a graduate student, my lad!"

"And maybe a hornet," the kid answered softly as he lashed Roybal's wrists, "savvies a few of the answers, amigo! Sometimes quick thinking beats a knife or gun, hands down!"

Old Jim Free's reply wasn't intended for publication.

CHAPTER III

WINGS FOR THE HORNET

TWO days later a rider topping a nondescript looking sorrel gelding rode out of the timber below Hurricane Peak. He halted in a grassy little park beside the narrow stream which snaked through the notched gut of the pass, then tumbled into many deep and swift pools beyond the scarp's base. A very youthful rider, leading a pack mule in tow, appeared out of the lengthening shadows of late afternoon.

To the laired lookout on the point above the pass into Agua Poquita, watching this stranger's appearance and every move, there was something very amusing and ludicrous about it all. A runny-nosed button, the guard's pair of glasses told him; a fuzzy-faced maverick kid who wore no cutter on his hip, and seemed rather bewildered by the wild country he'd found himself in. A plumb harmless-looking slickear, a stray plumb off his home range—was what the sharp-eyed watcher of Blackjack Horrel's gang tagged the newcomer.

And his subsequent actions only served to impress the notion more firmly in that hidden lookout's estimation. No one would have suspected for a moment that this curly-haired, youthful-faced young 'un was the same who'd handled Plug Jeffries and Topeka Bolt with such canny ease in Alamitos, or was nonchalantly jogging deep into *ladrone* country on the look for buskies. A man with far more astuteness than the breed

watcher on the point would have been fooled, just as he was.

While his sorrel and pack mule grazed, the kid was busy rigging out fishing tackle from his duffle. The breed above could see plainly the expectant, contented look upon Hornet's smooth face as he caught a big horsefly, hooked it, then cast into the pool to jerk out a flashing rainbow trout a moment later. Three fell to his luck before he put up the tackle, and cleaned them at the creek edge.

If Hornet gave any thought to the man he knew to be laired above, no inkling of it showed on his features or in his actions. For hours he'd been riding rough country, heading toward the Cimarron malpais and the hideout of the Horrel crowd. Back there in Alamitos he and Marshal Free had made all plans and preparations, after the Roybal spig had talked. Hornet knew plenty ways to make a fellow spill, and the trick hadn't been difficult, with Roybal a prisoner in an isolated shack several miles from town.

Hornet had left his "magic key," the bulk of his money and anything incriminating with the old federal officer; he had gotten away from town without being seen or tailed. This was his game, this trapping of two-legged lobos, and like true sportsmen, the more adventure was promised, the more sport he would find. He didn't minimize the danger he was riding into, but he did have a firm trust in his uncanny knack of self-protection, ability with hands and feet, and power of lightning-swift thinking.

Nor did he minimize his star of luck. A queer luck that had guarded and guided him in several nip-and-tuck escapades since he had deserted the footlights as a sleight-of-hand artist and ju-jutsu expert, for the far more thrilling and appealing game of checkmating various gentry who lived outside the pale of the law.

As he remounted his sorrel and started toward the gap leading into Agua Poquita, there was certainly nothing in his bearing or innocent countenance to create suspicion to any watcher. He rode that trail which was supposed to bring certain death to any stranger with no more indication of fear than if it was the quietest cowtown street in the West.

Nor did the man lying in wait above evidently see in this boyish rider anything more menacing than a youthful tenderfoot, leading a lightly burdened pack mule, enjoying to his fullest extent the last blaze of sunshine, the scent of piñon and cedar, the twittering of birds. He seemed intensely interested in the antics of a pair of squirrels frolicking high in a nearby spruce as he approached the lair of the lookout.

Hornet didn't know, of course, that the breed had a few minutes before been joined by a second person who'd ridden to the gap from the basin beyond. A lean wolf of a man who stared hard and long at the newcomer through the binoculars, then gave a clipped order to the grinning lookout, who immediately began building a reata loop.

HORNET, apparently watching the squirrels, spotted the location of the breed beyond the point of rock not twenty feet from the trail. He even visioned the loop ready for a quick cast, held in an expert hand. But he kept right on, whistling blithely, both hands on his saddle stem. It suited his plans exactly to be captured in such a maner. That he might be tortured or killed as a result never entered his mind to any great extent. He was willing to take his chance on that.

So it was no surprise at all to Hornet when the rawhide shot over his head and about his body, pinioning his arms in a vise. But he simulated surprise, also wide-eyed fright, as the grinning breed followed up his throw and swiftly, deftly bound Hornet with a skill equaling his own.

"Wha—what's the idea?" he blustered in a small voice. "You a robber, mister?"

The breed chuckled, then glanced along the path at the sound of hoofs. The man who had ridden from the basin appeared around a point, reined his night-black mount and regarded the captive narrowly. And Hornet, from the description furnished by old Jim Free, knew immediately that he looked upon Black Jack Horrel, big rod of the Agua Poquita gang.

swered, gulping a little for Horrel's benefit: "I'm hunting."

Black Jack studied him, with lips twisted into his queer half-smile and flickering lights in his inky eyes. "Hunting, eh? May I ask just what, my young friend?"

"Gold," nodded Hornet. "I heard back at the Blue that there was plenty of it up thisaway, and few claims staked. So I rode ahead."

Horrel let his gaze flick to Hornet's pack mule, with its prominently

"Well, kid," Horrel asked, "just ridin', or headed somewhere in particular?" His voice was quiet, and smooth as silk.

Hornet felt the hackles on his neck stir. Why the man's voice sent that spidery tickle along his spine, Hornet could not have explained; any more than a dog could have explained why the voice of Jack Horrel made the hairs rise on its neck. And right then the kid knew there was something vastly vicious and cruel and evil about that wolf-lean, willowy man with his flat and strangely pale face in which eyes black as coals burned above a hawklike nose.

Hornet knew, then, that this would be a hard one to fool. And he answered displayed pick and shovel, then back to the jaded sorrel and the scabbed saddle on its back. A rifle boot slung there, with a weapon thrust in it way too small for the leather's size. Black Jack kneed his horse ahead, drew the undersized gun from its scabbard, looked at it curiously. It was a .22 caliber target rifle, showing signs of considerable use by the scarred stock and rust-scarred barrel.

"That won't shoot very good," Hornet explained apologetically. "I traded for it back at Rincon, and think maybe I got stung."

The breed guffawed, but Horrel merely smiled his crooked grimace, looking up from the toy rifle to Hornet's face. "Who told you there was

'bear in these here hills', young fellow?"

"Couple of men in the Blues," Hornet said. "Said they were coming up here soon as their workings petered out. Don't remember their names. But an officer back at a place called Alamitos told me the same thing, too —about gold being up here. Folks called him Topeka, I think."

Hornet frowned in concentration, then nodded. "Yes, that was it—Topeka. You working claims up here, mister?" he went on eagerly. "My name's Homer Price, and I came from Iowa to El Paso on account of weak lungs."

"And to the Cimarron with a .22," added Horrel, thoughtfully. "Well, Mister Price, some of the boys have a claim back yonder a piece. If you want to sit about awhile and chat, you're welcome."

To the breed he nodded, "You can take off the hobbles, Chone. You see," he explained gravely to Hornet, "Chone evidently thought you a claim-jumper, so acted accordingly. You'll have to excuse his zeal—we have a pretty close-knit corporation up here."

Hornet wasn't kidded one iota by that grave, mocking voice, a voice so like the sleazing of soft silk. No man could tell the thoughts going on behind the outlaw's inky, hooded eyes—eyes which Hornet felt boring into his back as, following Horrel's direction, he led out on his sorrel down trail into the wooded basin. Black Jack followed close behind, still smiling his half-smile.

THE sun was just setting, its last rays filtering among the massed trees, staining the western peaks crimson. The still air was filled with the angelus chattering of squirrels, bird calls, raucous cries of jays. Dusk would fall swiftly, up here among the high hills; already the dim track among the trees was fading in shadow.

Quite suddenly they came upon a cabin that once had stood in a tiny clearing—a log hut once the home of some man, whom the high hills and relentless wilderness had conquered. Its shadow through tne pines was like the dimness of a ghost at twilight, with a yellow gleam marking its open doorway. Outside a wood fire burned cheerfully, with the fragrance of boiling coffee and roasting meat tangy on its faint smoke.

Three men hunkered about the blaze, two busy spitting venison on sticks, the third stirring a skillet full of frying potatoes. They stared curiously, narrow-lidded, as Horrel told Hornet to dismount.

"This is Mister Homer Price, lately of Iowa and El Paso," Black Jack told them gravely. "He's a prospector by profession, seeking gold in the Cimarrones. Sent hither by parties on the Blue and in Alamitos. I've invited him to sit and chat awhile after supper."

And to Hornet he said: "Meet Denver, Billito and Full-House, friend Price. All good lads and pards of mine. We're working this Agua Poquita claim in shares, I might add. We'll eat directly. You might tend to your livestock in the meanwhile."

Hornet smiled and nodded uncertainly to the group. He was turning away to look after unsaddling and feeding his animals when a voice from the trio halted him in midstride. A drawly, lazy voice, but sinister as the slither of a rattlesnake across dry leaf mold.

"His name wasn't Homer Price when I seen him last," said the man called Full-House. "It was the Shake-'Em-Down Kid, an' he lifted ev'rything 'cept their eyeteeth off'n a lot of boobs on the opry house stage at Fort Worth. Six, seven month ago, reckon."

"So," breathed Jack Horrel softly. "So. The bat comes home to roost, as usual. Never mind your livestock just now, my nimble-fingered friend."

He laughed suddenly, shortly, and utterly without mirth. "Don't know

just what I'd do without you, Full-House. You and your camera eye!"

Hornet had slowly turned at the outlaws' talk, gazing from the tall, lanky Full-House to Jack Horrel. A six-shooter had magically appeared in F-H's fist, its bore carelessly covering the newcomer.

"What's all the row?" Hornet asked with well-feigned astonishment. "You fellows think it queer because a man's got to make a living by doing stunts with his fingers? I played show houses in a good many Texas towns, on vaudeville bills. Shake-'Em-Down was my s t a g e name."

"It's been changed now," stated Horrel. "No dice, kid. You would fool a lot of folks with your front, but not me. Y'see, I've been looking you over pretty carefully. You're light, but there is nothing skinny or slow about it—sorta like a puma all set to jump, what I mean. I've been watching."

Motioning Hornet close to the fire, the outlaw expertly went over him again with probing fingers. "Chone might have missed something," he grinned bleakly, "seeing as how the situation has changed somewhat."

But the nearest to a weapon that Horrel unearthed was a rusty-looking pocket knife with horn handle, battered and dull. Not nearly so good a weapon as a woman's hat pin. Black Jack dropped it back in Hornet's pocket with a short chuckle, jerked a thumb for the kid to have a seat.

"Tales of scalp money below kind of caught your fancy, did it, amigo? How much have they raised the ante, now?"

"You're talking Greek to me," said Hornet, spreading fingers to the blaze, shaking his head in negation as Horrel offered him his makin's. "I had a couple of hundred stake, all I needed. That is—" he smiled—"until you relieved me of it. Want to trade back?"

The three men about the fire, who'd been watching him with much the expression a bunch of caged lynxes show when a small, harmless animal appears in reach of their claws, looked at Horrel. What did this pilgrim mean—about tradin' back? Must not be quite bright.

But Black Jack seemed amused. "Trade what, friend? Looks like I hold the aces in this little game. What's the joker?"

"This, maybe." Hornet negligently displayed a heavy hunting-case watch in his hand, with chain attached. "Lose it perhaps, Mister Horrel?"

"What in hell!" Black Jack's fingers darted to his vest pocket, encountered emptiness. For a full half-minute he stared steadily into the innocent face of the kid, his own features inscrutable.

"I'd never have believed it," he said at last, reaching out to take the watch. "It's a pity that one so young, and with such talents, should pass out in the bloom of youth. But curiosity and idle hands often encounter wrong occupation, Shake-'Em-Down. I'm really sorry."

"I wouldn't trust 'im in ten foot of me," Full-House stated flatly. "Not even if his hands was tied, and I knew it!"

"And I was beginning to like this little valley," sighed Hornet.

"Which makes things hunky-dory," said Horrel. "We'll try to accommodate you as—a permanent resident! But until after supper, young man, you are our guest. Never let it be said that Jack Horrel started one like you on the long sashay without a full belly!"

"We all have our own viewpoints," replied Hornet, helping himself to grub. "In other circumstances, mister, I could almost like you."

"That's quite mutual. In fact, it's so mutual on my side that I've decided to delay your—er—departure from our midst until moonup. Which will be—" he glanced at his watch with a wry smile—"shortly before midnight. A mighty few hours, true

—but that many. I'll even go further, young man. And let you call the card—hemp or lead. I trust that you appreciate my consideration!"

"Thanks. I can see why you've gone far in your profession, why you've remained loose so long, Horrel. Sorta a think-and-a-half ahead of the game. Which is more than Plug and Topeka rate, I might add."

"Quite true. Still, they have their uses. You've been doing a bit of business with them, have you?"

"Seeing as I'm alla same dead man, I'll tell you boys something rather amusing," Hornet grinned. And he recounted his adventure with the Palace floorman and Alamitos marshal, which drew uproarious mirth from the quartet. In return, Jack Horrel quite frankly discussed his brigandage in the Territory, openly admitting the holdups and robberies which rumor placed at his door. Which told Hornet, beyond the iota of a doubt, that he was due to sprout wings very, very soon.

CHAPTER IV

A Blazing Send-off

SUPPER finished, Horrel tossed away his quirly snipe, smiled at the kid, then nodded to his men to truss him up. "Sorry, amigo," he sardonically apologized, "but I can't take chances. It may look like a mean break, but that's the way the cards were cut today. It was a pleasure to feed you."

Hornet made no resistance. Hog-tied with a reata, he was shoved along to the cabin, where wrists and ankles were bound. The outlaw called Denver took his seat just outside the closed door, Winchester resting across his knees. The others relaxed about the fire, secure in the belief that with the nimble-fingered kid unarmed and expertly bound in the guarded shack, they had nothing to fear.

The youngster Billito, keeping up the atmosphere, took out his mouth harp and began mournfully playing *Cowboy Lament* and other dirge-like prairie refrains. Denver chuckled, the eye of his brownie glowing in the night. "Givin' yuh a prime send-off, kid," he remarked.

Hornet made some idle retort, thankful for the music and the outlaw's full-stomached tranquility. Hitching his trousers into a certain position, he managed to extract the ancient horn-handled knife with a bit of difficulty, and pressed the spring which opened a razor-keen hidden blade. Cutting his bonds, he massaged hands and wrists a minute to restore circulation, a wry, mirthless grimace edging his mouth. The cold companionship of that steel blade was iron in his soul, a true friend in an hour of stress. If they'd taken it from him—

But they didn't. Tiptoeing to the door, which was slightly ajar, he peered out at Denver, who was leaning negligently against the wall, looking toward the fire. Slowly, noiselessly, he inched the door open, his gaze never leaving Denver's head.

Denver felt something like the tip of a needle prick against his throat, just as steely fingers clamped upon his left ear. "It's a knife, amigo—in case you wonder!" came Hornet's soft whisper. "And it can slit your windpipe before you even let out one little-bitty squeal!"

Denver froze, motionless, his breath coming hard. With plenty of guts where a gun or fists were concerned, he shrank in mortal terror of a blade. He'd seen too many gory messes made with one. So he kept very still, and only croaked "Don't cut me, feller!" Kept quiet even as Hornet snaked the six-shooter from his belt and rifle from his knees.

"Slip just inside the door and spread down," the kid commanded. And with the lengths of rope he'd

cut from his own person, swiftly trussed the outlaw. The odds were whittled down three to one, not counting that fellow Chone. And Hornet now was armed. He had entered that roost with nothing but the old .22, trusting his luck and ability to secure real arms from one of its denizens. Now he'd passed what he considered the first crucial point of his plan.

But that trio about the fire was something else again. No matter if he managed the drop, one of them would get him. Horrel and Full-House he knew to be hot hell on wheels with their sixes, Billito he knew nothing about, but likely he was fast as well. For a moment Hornet stood in the door's shadow, figuring as to what play was next.

For he knew that next move would be pitting all his craft and skill against quarry as keenly intelligent as himself, with all odds on the game he stalked. But Hornet didn't get a chance to decide his next move. That was done for him.

BILLITO had finished a mournful tune on his harmonica, and Black Jack called out genially, "Enjoying the music, kid? If you have any special selection, sing out and Billy will be glad to oblige."

Hornet was ready to answer when Denver beat him to the draw.

"*Chigaroo,* gang!" he bawled hoarsely. "This devil's l o o s e an' heeled! Watch out!"

Hornet leaped away from the door to the hut's corner. "Hist 'em, hombres!" he snapped. "You're under the mistletoe!"

They didn't hist. Like snakes all three rolled away from the fireglow, going for their guns. Jack Horrel's gang was no maverick crowd to claw sky in a pinch. They would go down scrapping to the last, well knowing that capture would mean the noose. And a split second after the flash of Hornet's pistol betrayed his position, a bullet nicked the cloth above his shoulder tip.

"You meant well, Jack," the kid called tauntingly. "If I'd stood still you would have got me!" And ducking around the cabin, he made into the scrub, knowing from the stream of low profanity beyond the fire circle that his lone slug had found the harmonica player in a tender spot.

Crouching back by the brush corral, still keeping pistol and rifle, Hornet listened and waited for sign of the now silent outlaws. That the shooting would quickly bring Chone to the scene he didn't doubt, but if possible Hornet wanted to keep the men away from the horses penned behind the cabin. So he holed up, utterly motionless.

And a grim game of tag began there in Agua Poquita basin, in the darkness lessened only by starlight. The shots had silenced the winged and four-footed night prowlers. Only the rill of the brook sang in the high quiet, or the restless paw of a horse, with now and then a sinister creak of brush or rustle of leaf. There was no wind.

"Jerk and kill," muttered Hornet. "And hell take the loser."

With the patience of an Indian he lay in wait, every sense tuned. He heard the hoot of an owl, and knew that Chone had arrived. And presently he heard also a small sound approaching the corral. Like a stretching cougar Hornet eased to his feet, eyes probing the dark.

Someone was easing toward the brush pen, all right. A tall, stooped figure inching through the bush, starlight glinting now and then upon the drawn weapon in his hand. The man was almost close enough for Hornet to touch—almost, but not quite.

A flick of his thumb, and the soft sound of a dropping pebble behind and beyond the stalker whirled that gent abruptly. Even as he wheeled his six-shooter blazed toward the spot, raking it with a cone of fire. Also

even as it thundered Hornet moved, leaping like a panther. He'd left his rifle against a tree bole, thrust the pistol in his waistband. Using only his bare hands, he attacked Full-House from behind, chopping a neck blow just beneath his right ear.

As the gangly outlaw gasped and staggered, Hornet grasped his gun wrist, snatched it across his own shoulder, stooped and heaved. Full-House's arm snapped like a pipe stem, his screech of agony piercing the night. Moaning like a dog in pain, he pitched forward, feet drumming against the ground.

Hornet grabbed the fallen pistol, faded into deeper covert. The lank Tehanner would be out of it pretty completely, now. But the kid didn't waste any time shaking hands with himself over the feat—he savvied too well what was still cut out for him. Chone and Horrel were still on the loose, swift as rattlers to strike and far surer of their aim. For a snake might strike against boot leather, but that precious pair would not. Nor did they give away their position when Hornet jumped Full-House.

THAT Denver was still struggling with his bonds in the hut Hornet knew, for he could hear the sounds. What had become of Billito he knew not, but he did savvy that he would have to bring this game to a showdown quickly, or chance being trapped by the men who knew every inch of the small basin. So, warily circling away from the cabin and the red coals of the fading fire, he busied himself briefly at a thick clump of brush and deadwood not far from the brook bank. A vagrant breath of wind had risen, riffling the leaves whispery-like.

Chone, hunkered downwind in the dark, was first to see that little spot of light fan into rising, steady glow. Jack Horrel caught it a second later, and a rasping, whole-hearted curse spewed from his thin lips. This brush fire, kindled behind them, would give

that eel-slick kid all the aces. He'd have them against the light. Fox smart, that—

The dry brush flamed up like tinder, lighting the basin in eerie glow. With its first glimmer Hornet had started a flank movement, keeping the light to his left side, probing the clearing darkness for sign of his antagonists. Denver was yelling hoarsely from the cabin; a dark figure beyond the coals of the supper fire was painfully dragging itself toward the brook, right leg useless. Billito had stopped a slug, all right, as pay for his fiddling. But he carried a pistol in his hand.

"Why don't you play your harp now?" called the kid.

A gun smashed ahead of Hornet, and a sear of fire lanced across his short-ribs, turning him half around. But even as he twisted and went to a knee, the six in his fist spat thrice, bracketing the spot whence the flash had come. A strangled yell, a curse, the shuffle of feet followed, and a squat figure staggered against the backdrop of blazing scrub, ran a dozen weaving, uncertain steps and tumbled.

That would be the breed Chone, Hornet checked off, as he opened his shirt and explored the groove across his ribs. An ugly gash, but shallow as wounds went. Hunkered, rudely bandaging it with strips of undershirt to check the bleeding, he tried to locate Horrel out there in the dark.

For minutes the duel went on, with Hornet creeping through the scrub like a bobcat. He knew that Jack Horrel would shoot instantly toward the sound of a stirring leaf, the crack of a twig; knew the outlaw was stalking him just that way, too, with finger tensed on pistol trigger.

The finale came with jerky abruptness. The light of a leaping brushfire makes objects uncertain, grotesque; shadows dance and change. Hornet's keened senses could feel his enemy near, but in the wavering shadows he could spot nothing. It was Jack Horrel's voice from the dense darkness ahead that froze the kid in his tracks. A voice very calm, and satisfied, and silky, its owner wholly invisible.

"It's been a tag game, kid," said Black Jack "but it's heads I win, tails you lose. Your number is up—"

Before Hornet could reply a splintering crash came from in front. Horrel, who had stealthily climbed a tree, happened to place a little too much weight on a rotting limb stub, and it snapped off under his foot. Down he came in a shower of dry drift and bark, to land hard in a briar and thorn-matted thicket. And even as he tumbled he fired—five shots in swift succession that sprayed the area around the flattened kid.

Had he remained upright the sleet of lead would have cut him off at the pockets. As it was, a slug nicked his jaw bone, drawing blood. Strangely the kid didn't return the volley, but held his fire. Five shots—likely but one left in the six-shooter.

Horrel's voice came again, cool, a bit rueful.

"That's that, amigo—I give it to you. You're a sport, not shooting as I came down! Listen! The moon's just coming up—in a minute she'll be over the rim. An even break between us when it comes out. What do you say? We step out and cut loose—when the moon shows."

"All right," cautiously replied Hornet. "The bet's called, Jack. When the moon shows—it's open season—"

BOTH knew, law and outlaw, that each would keep his word. Black Jack Horrel, outcast of a prominent family and outlaw of dark trails, guilty of many sins and crimes, aimed to kill him, Hornet, with not a thought of mercy in his mind. Yet the kid savvied Horrel's strange chivalry, even as he was prepared to shoot and kill.

Horrel was speaking again, wry irony in his words. "I spotted you

from the first minute, kid," he said, "as possessing plumb peculiar powers. You *might* have fooled me, maybe, save for Full-House's camera eye. Now that showdown is here, you mind telling me your monicker?"

"Hornet," said the kid. "The real name don't matter, Jack."

"Hornet." The outlaw repeated it, then laughed shortly. "Yes, I've heard of you. Through the whispering of the leaves, you know. Well, we settle things even enough, Hornet. Yonder's the moon. Ready?"

"Ready, Black Jack. *Salud y pesetas!*"

"Keno. Bad hunting, kid—and lots of it! Let's go!"

Both duelists rose from their covert, and the night echoed to the crash and roll of gunfire. Dim and ghostly, vague phantoms in the uncertain light, two gnomes moved, red stabs ripping from their hands. They ripped and roared, until silence fell and the echoes clashed away across arroyo and hogback. Hornet, six empty, teetered on his feet, right hand clasping the bullet score across his left forearm. And in the stark silence which followed he heard the sound of labored breathing from the bush clump where Horrel had stood.

Hornet stumbled forward, struck a match, bent above the figure sprawled on the leaf mold. Its sagging head moved slightly, the hand that lay supine gripped a gun whose muzzle dribbled lazy smoke.

"Pick—up—the—marbles, k i d," came Black Jack's hoarse, choked words—words filled with a sort of wonder, and frank admiration. "They told me—you could shoot fast—and straight, Hornet! I reckon they were right!" His chuckle gurgled brokenly.

The kid saw that Black Jack was dying, done for. Reaching into the outlaw's shirt pocket, Hornet took out the makin's and rolled an awkward cigarette, placing it between Horrel's bloody lips. Horrel puffed weakly, nodding his thanks.

"Didn't I—even nick you—once?" he gasped. Hornet showed his arm, and a twisted grimace skewed Black Jack's mouth. "Glad I didn't—plumb miss you!" he said. "You pumped me so full—and so fast—by hell, you can shoot—kid! Hornet, yeah! Not big, but—but packing the sting! How many damn times—did you shoot?"

"Emptied it," the kid told him bleakly. "She was full house."

"Hell—same—here. Hell!" And Horrel closed his eyes. "Cleaned us on your own—just like a jaguar cub in a flock of woollies."

His head slumped sideways. Hornet bent close, but Horrel was dead.

Around noon the next day Marshal Jim Free, riding out of the timber below Hurricane Peak, watched a strange procession winding down the creek bank which emerged from Agua Poquita. There was the burly Denver, wrists and ankles lashed to saddle. Billito, a bashed leg tied out against his mount's neck, blanket protected. A droopy Full-House, with his broken arm in a crude sling, gloomy and taciturn. Behind them came Hornet, a Winchester resting across his saddle horn.

Old Jim Free reined his horse, regarding the procession with quizzical scrutiny. The kid grinned wryly at old Jim—a hard, thin grimace with scant mirth in it. The U. S. deputy saw how stiff he rode, how he favored his arm and side.

"Where's the rest of the party?" asked Free, shifting his quirly from one mouth corner to the other.

"Back yonder. Chone and Black Jack didn't want to come."

Free grunted. "I reckon. Details can keep till later, son. Yuh done right noble. I got some company for these here three. They're married tuh trees back along the trail aways."

He grinned. "Yeah—Topeka an' Plug an' Big Bill, not tuh mention friend Roybal. The spick's evidence was enough for me tuh corral 'em in, which I done plumb inconspicuous-

like. Reckon the Palace is still closed, an that Alamitos 'ull need a new city marshal."

"Well, well." Hornet winked at the gloomy Full-House, who was listening. "Looks like high, low, jack and game, marshal. Plumb. I told you," the kid finished non-committally, "that brains plus luck would beat a gun. Ain't I right, Full-House?"

"You go to hell!" growled the lank outlaw. "I ain't a-sayin'!"

"Then maybe Billito," grinned Hornet, "will give us *Poor Boys* on his harmonica."

"Maybe," gritted the young busky, "when ice freezes in Yuma, I will. Damn you! Wish I'd 'a' gut-shot you the minnit I seen yore mismated eyes, you half-pint son! They ain't nothin' but bad luck—an' heaps of it!"

"Yuh spoke a mouthful, plumb," nodded old Jim Free. "A sidewinder's a half-pint, an' so's dynamite. Both nuthin' but bad luck. Likewise a hornet is—Hornet! Le's go."

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of Sure-Fire Western, published bi-monthly at Springfield, Mass.
for November, 1937

State of New York } ss.
County of New York }

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and country aforesaid, personally appeared A. A. Wyn, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Publisher of the Sure-Fire Western and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

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PERIODICAL HOUSE, INC., Publisher,
A. A. Wyn, Publisher.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 18th day of August, 1937.

EDWARD H. ZINSER,
Notary Public
Queens Co. Clk's No. 2976, Reg. No. 3095
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Commission expires March 30, 1938.

MUSTANGERS

By
Kenneth P. Wood

How the frontier horse-hunter captured the wild-riding broomtails.

NOT so many years ago the wild horses in the State of Nevada had become such a nuisance and menace to the range and stock interests that the State Legislature, at the request of the Stock Association, passed a law allowing the killing of wild, unbranded cayuses upon the range of that state. Within a year or two some 15,000 horses, good bad and indifferent, had been shot, and their hides, manes, and tails taken by the hunters in payment for their work.

As the supply became smaller the hunters grew careless as to whether or not the horses that they shot were branded. Often carcasses of animals were found minus hide, mane and tail, but with feet shod all around, showing them to be hardly in the mustang class.

An inspection of horse hides that had been purchased from the hunters and in the hands of hide dealers, showed that a large percentage of the skins bore well-known brands belonging to stockmen all over the state. The ranchers came to be afraid to turn out old "Dobbin" for a Sunday run on the plains in the vicinity, lest some skulking hide-hunter pot him in a lonely ravine or gulch where he had driven him for slaughter.

So it came to pass that the stockmen had, in self-defense, to ask the legislature to repeal the law, and within a few years the wild horses began rapidly to increase until again they were a pest.

In 1908, the stockmen of Nevada met at Austin. Among other things they adopted a resolution asking the next State Legislature to pass a law

giving an exclusive right to the rangers of the United States Forest Service to shoot all wild horses found at large after a certain date. The intention was to allow the owners of horses a reasonable time to get their stock out of the way, and then have the rangers shoot the rest.

The first horses of the Western Hemisphere were probably brought here by the Spaniards. In 1545, almost fifty years before Jamestown was settled, Coronado, the Spanish explorer, was roaming about the plains of New Mexico. He tells of the dogs used by the Indians to haul their plunder on lodge poles, indicating that they had no horses at that date.

In 1716, the Spanish again worked their way eastward across the plains, and their letters tell of the astonishment of the Indians at seeing the horses they had with them. This expedition was constantly losing animals and there is little doubt that the first droves of Western ponies originated from these strays.

Captain Pike, who toiled bravely up the Arkansas River across what are now parts of Oklahoma, Kansas, and Colorado, tells of the immense bands of mustangs that they saw on every side. This was back in 1806, and earlier travelers than he write of them also.

In the old days upon the prairie they were as great a menace to travelers as they were during the beginning of the present century. Woe betide the luckless camper who allowed a band of broomtails to get close enough to his gentle horses, turned out for the night, to sweep them off. It was almost useless to follow, for the call of the wild comes to the gentlest of horses when thrown with a band of wild ones that have been born and raised free of all restraint. It is a well-known fact that the hardest one to "cut out"—the leader of them all in the mad stampede across the open spaces—is the old, gentle, well-broken saddle or work horse, once he gets a taste of such freedom.

IN those days various methods of capturing the wild horses were followed. Men made it a regular business, and were called "mustangers." One of their devices was "creasing." This consisted in shooting a bullet so that it struck the animal on the top of the neck just in front of the withers and about an inch or so deep, close to the spinal column. The shock temporarily stunned the horse, and the hunter ran up and tied the animal's feet together before he recovered. A rope halter was slipped over his head, and a gentle saddler, or sometimes a work ox, was led up alongside the prostrate beast, securely necked to the tame one, and thus could be handled easily.

Old-time mustangers say, however, that for every one horse caught this way fifty were killed. As a matter of fact, the method was not used very much except in an emergency, when a hunter, after days of attempts to capture, finally took the risk of successfully creasing an unusually fine animal rather than see him escape altogether. In the Pecos country, about thirty-five years ago, it was not uncommon to see a cow-pony with a hole in his neck, where the ball from some heavy buffalo gun had plowed its way through the flesh just high enough above the spine not to kill and low enough to stun effectually.

The mustangers generally used a longer but safer method of capture. The average range horse waters not oftener than once every twenty-four hours, frequently at much longer intervals, and, unless disturbed, always at the same waterhole.

The hunters, mounted on their best horses, without saddles, and stripped of all extra weight in clothing, would patiently watch a bunch of "broomies" come to water for several days, noting the direction from which they came and spotting the animals in

the herd that they considered most desirable.

Having satisfied themselves on these points, the men, usually three in number, spread out. One remained close to the watering place, while the others went out some miles in the direction usually taken by the herd upon leaving the waterhole. There they separated, each getting on top of some hill or elevation where he could see the country about him.

The mustangs, having satisfied their thirst, file slowly out along the trail, gorged with water, and in no condition for a hard run. Having allowed them to get well started, the mustanger rides out behind them in full view. The wary animals, quick to note a moving object, stop for an instant. The leader turns, neighs shrilly, races down the line of alert heads to the rear of the column, circles about, and the whole band with one impulse is off in a thundering stampede, fairly hidden by the dust they raise.

The hunter falls in behind them, his excited horse, trained to such work, straining at the bit and eager to overtake the flying animals ahead.

Now every horse in running, has to stop after the first burst of speed for his second wind. The plan of the mustanger is to keep the drove going and prevent any slackening of pace. As soon as the mount of the first hunter begins to show signs of distress, the second mustanger, who has been watching the race from his point of observation, falls in behind the band on a fresh animal and keeps up the chase.

Logy with water, the wild ones ahead begin to slacken a bit. Perhaps a very young colt falls behind, whinnying pitifully as his dam crowds forward from the nameless terror in pursuit.

With manes and tails streaming in the wind, dripping with sweat and covered with lather, they plunge ahead until out from behind a sheltering tree or a cut-off coulee dashes the third mustanger on a lively saddler.

The herd swings aside and sweeps around in a broad curve, as the third man, riding out to one side, turns them slowly. Finally they double back upon the other two riders, and by this time the fuzztails begin to show signs of fatigue, and their speed slackens perceptibly.

The three pursuers have ridden without saddles and carried their reatas in their hands, with the ends securely fastened about the neck of their mounts, just tight enough to slip over the head. Around his waist each man carries a couple of hogging cords, pieces of soft, light rope about six feet in length.

CROWDING close in upon the herd, which is by this time greatly exhausted, each rider picks out the cayuse he wants and works along beside it, and as it is a very short throw, the roping is an easy matter. A quick jerk draws the noose up about the captive's neck; the lariat is thrown over the horse's withers and down so that his front feet step over it.

At this instant the ridden horse is swung suddenly at right angles to the mustang. When the rope tightens, the wild one's forefeet are jerked out from under him with a whirl that lands him stunned and breathless in a heap, generally with his head buried under his body. When the handling is done in this way, the strain on the neck of the ridden horse is very slight. But if the mustang regains his feet, as he sometimes does, the saddle horse gets a pretty rough deal before the wilding is finally thrown and hogtied.

The moment the "fuzzy" hits the ground, the mustanger drops off his mount and races to the fallen animal, untying his hogging cord as he runs. A loop is made about both front feet, and they are pulled back far enough to enable the hind foot to be bunched with the two front ones. The hog rope is whirled three or four times about

the three legs just at the ankles, and with a deft tie, the horse is secured. If nothing goes wrong, all this is often accomplished inside of two minutes from the first throw, and if the band is still in sight, the lasso is quickly gathered up, and with good luck a second beast is soon tied down.

After the roundup the mustangers generally sit down for a smoke, while their tired mounts get a rest and a roll. With the catching of the broomtails the fun is ended, and the real work begins.

If it is not too far from camp or too late in the day, the hunters go back and return with several saddle horses, or, what is better, a bunch of burros. To these gentle animals each wild horse is securely "necked" and his feet are then untied. After a half an hour of struggling and fighting, he will usually give up and let himself be dragged along by his mate to camp.

If, however, it is too late to go to camp, the horse is hobbled and left overnight. To leave him tied down would never do, for the tight binding stops the circulation, and in his thrashing about endeavoring to get up, a brute will very frequently kill himself.

The rest is a matter of education and work—work for the man—work for the horse. A large percentage of the fuzzies die under the breaking process. Many are killed accidentally, some cut themselves with ropes so that they cannot be gentled and have to be turned loose. Probably not over fifty per cent of the wild ones caught are finally broken and domesticated.

Often the horse-hunter, instead of catching the mustangs out on the prairie, will haze them toward a corral, following the animals for a whole day and sometimes for several days. They tag the herd constantly, never giving them an opportunity to eat, water, or rest. Moonlight evenings were selected for this work, and night and day the mustangers kept up a steady gait, until finally the weary animals, spent and hungry, could be driven almost anywhere the men wanted them to go. Right at the corral gate, however, they were likely to make a break and scatter like partridges.

In the late nineties wild horses did not bring much of a figure. The mares were not salable at any price, and the only marketable ones in the bunch were the males. These, considering the work of capturing, the cost in time and labor breaking them, the large percentage that were killed or died under the hackamore, did not sell for enough to make the business very profitable for the mustangers.

Of course, there were on the plains of Texas and New Mexico a great many professional hunters who followed it for a living, but they remained in it as much for the excitement as for anything else. And besides they frequently captured ranch horses that had been whisked away by the wild ones, for which they received substantial rewards.

The rise in the price of horseflesh that began in 1902 and 1903 helped to clean up many of these wild horse bands, because at last there was a market for them. Thousands were gathered and shipped away, until now the great roving herds have dwindled to a few straggling bunches here and there throughout the West.

But these few remaining are wilder than the wildest deer, more wary and harder to catch than the smartest fox. They run in the most inaccessible places, where the boldest rider cannot go faster than a walk. These untrammeled wildings are an integral part of our great American frontier, and it is hoped that some of them will always be permitted to go free.

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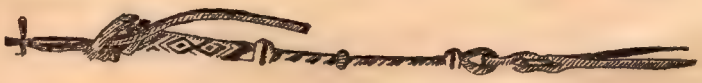

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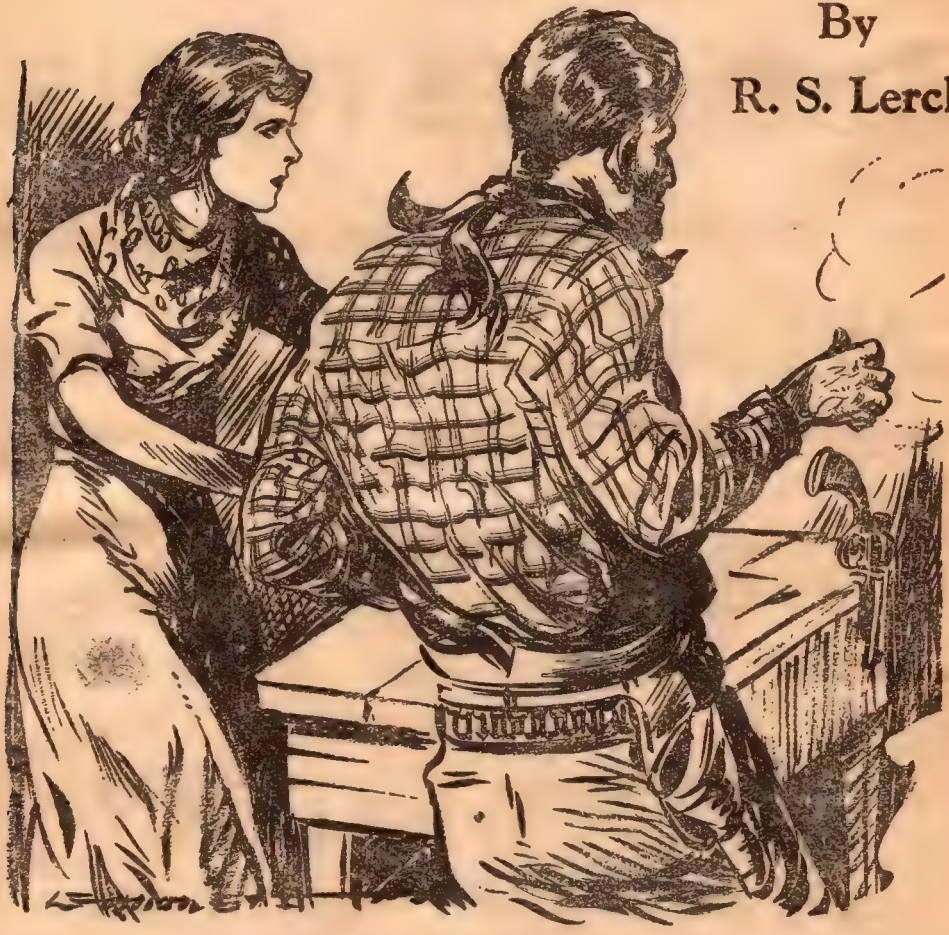

Flash Morgan was fast with his wits and lightning with his guns. But it took more than speed to buck the Sundown sixes of a two-legged wolf pack.

HE MADE an incongruous yet arresting picture as he rode into Sundown. A native headband kept the long, sun-bleached hair out of his eyes. His angular features, uncompromisingly stern as an Indian's and sun and wind burned to the color of mahogany, harmonized with his lean, powerful body, with the shaggy pony, the bared head, doeskin shirt, leggings and moccasins. But the scarred saddle with its filled rifle boot, and the crossed cartridge belts with their oil-soaked holsters and heavy, black forty-fives matched with the light hair and wolfish, gray eyes.

A man, lounging in the doorway of a shack near the edge of town, stared hard at the rider, jerked to attention as recognition occurred, and then quickly disappeared into the darkened interior. He left the shack by a rear door and hurried to the nearest saloon. Thirty seconds later, like the running spit of fire from a burning fuse, the word raced along Sundown's single street that Flash Morgan was back.

The bartender relayed it to Sam Grue and Drag Sanders in the private room of the Longhorn Saloon and Dancehall. Sam Grue's fat, flabby cheeks took on the color of a fish's belly, but his little, deep-set eyes became a trifle less porcine as they began to glitter. Drag Sanders' slight frame jerked erect.

"Get word to Pitch Hackle to watch him, then to high-tail it for the 203 pronto," he snapped at the bartender. He swung on his companion. "C'm on, boss. We better be headin' for the spread." He started for the door, followed by the big bulk of the rancher.

Flash Morgan rode slowly up to a little cabin-office with the sign, "Judge Ira Patton," over the door. As he dismounted his quick glance shot along the street. The dim outlines of faces in two or three grime-covered windows caught his attention. Then the batwing doors of the Longhorn, near the northern end of town, swung wide and a short, bow-legged little puncher followed by a man who outweighed him by a hundred pounds, crossed to the hitching rack, mounted, and rode on north at a fast clip. Morgan's eyes hardened slightly as he watched them go. There was a second of indecision while he reached for the saddle horn, as if to mount again, then he turned and entered the little cabin.

An erect, white-haired old man with craggy, weathered features that were hard and eyes that were not, came slowly to his feet as Morgan slipped quietly in and closed the door behind him.

"You—back," he half whispered.

There was a thin smile on Flash Morgan's face. He moved lithely sideways to the window and jerked the shade the rest of the way down, then once more faced the old man. The smile was gone.

"Just saw two who looked like Grue and Sanders heading north, judge. They still running the 203 ranch?"

Judge Patton nodded, his eyes beginning to twinkle.

"They're heading home. You never did hit it off with Grue and his foreman and they probably aren't anxious to meet you."

Morgan said, "They might be heading for the Coffee Pot—if Mary's still there."

Patton sobered. "She's still there, but Gruel'll be owning the Coffee Pot in another month, and then she won't be. He doesn't know that, though. He's sure he'll get her with the ranch. And what I said still goes. Grue won't want to meet you."

MORGAN shook his head. "I'm not so sure of that. He may get the idea I know more than he does. If he does he'll want to see me very soon, he and Sanders—*for the last time.*"

Judge Patton's eyes sharpened. He resumed his seat, leaned forward across the table, and remarked dryly: "You've always done a pretty good job of taking care of yourself. You've been away over two years, Flash. What do you know?"

Morgan took a chair facing the old lawyer.

"Suppose you tell me how things stand around here first. Maybe it'll be better if I don't tell what I know."

Judge Patton leaned back in his chair and his wise old eyes regarded the lean, stern features of Flash Morgan.

"Let's go back a little," he said quietly. "Three years ago, old Bill Mattox' daughter, Mary, married the

dashing *caballero*, Jim Dryer. About six months later a Mexican, Lola, showed up in Sundown. Then shortly after that old Bill Mattox sickened and died, leaving the big Coffee Pot spread to his daughter and her husband. Within a week Jim Dryer ran off with the Lola woman and took Mary's young ten-year-old brother with him. Right?"

"Close enough," Morgan replied shortly.

"Very well. At that time you were foreman of the Coffee Pot. You wanted to leave after Mary was married to Dryer, but old Mattox talked you out of it. Then, when old Bill died and her husband ran off with that Mexican harpy, Mary went nearly crazy. It wasn't Jim's desertion so much. She'd suspected what was going on for some time and was about through with him anyway.

"But it was the loss of the little brother she adored. She turned to you, as she's always done since you first rode into the Coffee Pot, a wild young buckaroo with a gift for slinging a gun fast and easy. You promised her you'd find little Bill and bring him back if he was alive, or you wouldn't return yourself. Right again?"

"Get on to what I don't already know," Morgan said with a flash of impatience.

The judge continued unperturbed: "The day after Jim Dryer disappeared, Grue, of the adjoining 203 ranch, showed up with a mortgage on the Coffee Pot spread signed by both Jim and Mary, and his canceled check for ten thousand which had been given to and endorsed by Jim. Mary remembered signing a number of papers a couple of days before, but she was so shaken by her father's death that she paid no attention to her husband's explanation of their contents. Since then she's been living only for your return with young Bill, hoping continually, but with the fires burning slowly lower.

"In the meantime there's a new, tough hombre with a nose like a hawk's who's taken over the job of foreman at the Coffee Pot. His name is Pitch Hackle and he's seen quite frequently with Sam Grue and Drag Sanders. He's in town now. Since he took over, the old Coffee Pot has been sliding to hell on greased skids. Neither the interest nor any part of the principal has been paid on that note. And all these months the fat hog, Sam Grue, has been waiting, with his greedy little eyes on the Coffee Pot and on Mary Mattox Dryer. That's the picture, Flash. Now you start talking."

Morgan did not reply at once. He thrust a hand inside the doeskin shirt and drew out a little pouch suspended form his neck by a rawhide thong. Untying it, he took out and passed to the old jurist a folded paper.

"Will that hold water, judge?" he asked quietly.

Patton adjusted his steel-rimmed spectacles and read the lines scrawled shakily on the paper, now and then interpolating a soft curse. He laid the paper down, shoved the spectacles up on his forehead, and breathed:

"Holy cow! Start talking."

Morgan did, calmly. "It took nearly six months for me to find Jim Dryer. When I found him it was in the center of a Mexican desert and within a hundred yards of a waterhole he could not reach. He and the Mexican woman had lived high, wide and handsome until he woke up one morning broke and discovered she had gone. He went from bad to worse, but he had this last bit of decency; he always managed to keep the lad with him. Then, crazy with marihuana, he took little Billie and started south. When his water began to run low, he threw the boy off his horse and kept going. He died within a half hour after I found him."

"But the boy—did you find his body?" Judge Patton snapped.

"I back-tracked carefully, found where he had tried to follow Jim

Dryer and fallen down, kept, on, falling again and again. Where he last lay there were marks of unshod hoofs heading west. Indians. I took the trail, but a windstorm wiped it out. I'd learned enough from it, however, to know they were Yaquis. For the last year and a half I've been searching the unexplored reaches of the Sierras, and Sundown is the first town I've hit since then. And now I'm going on to the Coffee Pot. I've already been here too long. You know what to do with that paper. Better go into action right away."

AS he swung back to the door Judge Patton called something, but Flash Morgan had already slipped outside. His swift glance up and down the single street was like the habitual survey of a wild animal before breaking cover. Swinging lithely into the saddle, he turned back and rode south. A half hour later, having picked up his packhorse from its concealment in a deep arroyo south of Sundown, he headed north, swinging wide of the town.

Yet he did not circle so far that a hawk-eyed man with a hook-nosed face, lying flat on the second story roof of Sundown's hotel, and with the aid of a small, telescoping field glass did not have a full opportunity for close and detailed observation. After a careful examination the man disappeared through the trap door, and within five minutes was racing along the trail to the north.

Flash Morgan kept away from the trail until the sun reached the western horizon, then he swung west. At the edge of the narrow road he dismounted and studied the dust for some moments. In a damp spot he reached down and touched the ridges of some of the hoof marks.

"Two went north, riding abreast, and a third came by later, not more'n twenty minutes ago," he murmured.

Remounting, he continued, his restless glance ever searching the grasslands while his mind was occupied with an endeavor to interpret what he had read from the trail. Night dropped swiftly and the skyline showed a stretch of cottonwoods marking the course of a stream threading through the rolling rangelands. Through a gap in the trees at the west the lighted window of the 203 ranch house glowed faintly.

Just before reaching the stream the trail divided, one branch turning east. Again Morgan dismounted for an examination. All three tracks took the left branch, to the west. Once more Flash Morgan muttered to himself, habit of long months of lone-wolfing.

"I saw Grue and Drag Sanders leave town. That's the first two. The judge said this Pitch Hackle was there too. Likely the second tracks his. If they are, why's he headed for the 203? Reckon that calls for a little scouting."

Remounting, he crossed the trail and rode to the stream, picking a spot where the cottonwoods were thickest. In the midst of them, concealed from both the range and the trail, he tied the pack horse and trailed the reins of his saddle pony. Hoofbeats sounded from across the river and the direction of the 203.

Flash Morgan walked quickly to the water's edge and waded across. He crouched at the base of a cottonwood flanking the open ground and his narrowed eyes sought the trail. A horseman topped a rise, coming fast and heading for the river crossing. He raced along the trail within a dozen yards of the motionless Flash.

He was a big man, with the easy seat of a range rider and the lean, hard build of a plainsman. Morgan got a glimpse of the low-slung gun, of the eagle-sharp face and high-hooked nose, and murmured, "Pitch Hackle, the jasper who got my job, eh? And heading for the Coffee Pot after visitin' Sam Grue and Drag Sanders. Nice. Sounds like he's been there to get his orders."

He stood up as Hackle's mount splashed across the stream and pounded on eastward along the trail to the Mattox ranch. For a full minute he looked longingly toward the lighted ranch house of Sam Grue. Finally he shook his head and turned back to his horse.

"Sure'd like to visit that fat hog, but them orders might've concerned Mary—since they probably know I'm back. Can't take a chance on anything happening to her."

He turned back and mounted. Five miles eastward the trail turned sharply to the north, leading once more toward the stream. Here Flash Morgan left it. This time he tethered his pack horse among cottonwoods nearly a quarter mile away from the trail, then rode on toward the Coffee Pot ranch house. The lights of the house were visible from the top of a swell. In the depression beyond he dismounted, trailing the reins.

HIS approach to the place was cautious as the approach of a Yaqui scout to the campfire of a Mexican patrol. Only after he had circled the buildings, had a look at the animals in the corral, and had made certain no crouching gunmen were waiting in the deep shadows as a reception committee, did he cross the ranch yard and mount the steps to the broad veranda.

There was more, now, than habitual alertness to his manner. Even after his reconnoitering he still had a feeling that all was not normal. The sensation was derived from the fact that the shades of the lighted front room were drawn. His moccasins made no more sound on the planks of the porch than would the pads of a cougar.

He lifted the latch carefully and noiselessly, stepped into the broad hall, and closed the door softly behind. To his left was the door to the lighted living room. He moved close to it, bent slightly to listen, heard the rustle of paper, then opened it and stepped inside quickly.

The man at the flat-topped desk, facing the door, jerked his head up. Swift surprise sprang into his sharp eyes before they became hard as agate.

"Who the hell are you, and what do you want? Even a breed knows enough to knock before he enters a strange house."

"I'm not a breed; this isn't a strange house. And you know who I am. Where's Mary Dryer?"

Except for the slight edge to it, Flash Morgan's voice was almost conversational. And, easy as the voice was, there was a balanced quality to his stance. His feet were spread a little, his weight on the balls; his body was bent forward slightly, and his hands hung loosely at his sides. the finger tips just touching the leather of his black holsters. Even a child would have sensed that he was poised for the swift action that had earned him his nickname.

"If you want to see Mrs. Dryer about a job, I'm the foreman and I can tell you she's not taking on any men. In fact, I've let four go in the last month."

"The last of the old, loyal bunch, eh? Drop it, Pitch Hackle. It won't work. Where's Mary?"

This time there was a definite command, if not a veiled threat, in Morgan's tone. Pitch Hackle's reaction to that was to jump to his feet while a mahogany flush tinted his cheeks and his eyes almost disappeared behind their lowered lids. As he strode from behind the flat-topped desk the long fingers of his right hand curled into claws that hovered above a low-hung six-gun. Morgan made no move, but a faintly sardonic light began to glow in his wolfish eyes.

"Don't bluff, Pitch. It won't take," he warned.

Hackle stopped and drew a long, slow breath. When he released it he had command of himself.

"You can't be Morgan, the old foreman of the Coffee Pot? I heard—"

"Do I look like someone who'd just stepped off the Kansas City Express? For the last time, where's Mary?"

There was the snap of a steel trap in Morgan's voice. Hackle relaxed, lengthened his taut features, and spread both hands in a half gesture of apology.

"Why didn't you say so in the first place? Mrs. Dryer rode over to the Diamond B this afternoon. Mrs. Ford was sick and she planned to spend the night there, or at least stay until the doctor arrived. Sorry, but if you'd—"

"How'd she go? Drive over?" Flash asked.

"Why, no. You should remember she never drives when she can ride."

"Right. And she took one of the cow-ponies, and left behind her favorite pinto, who's out there in the corral rarin' for a run. Now, we'll just have a showdown, Pitch Hackle. Why're you stalling and what—"

His voice, grown suddenly hard as a wood rasp, checked. The pound of horses' hoofs coming up the trail could be heard rapidly growing more distinct.

"So that's it?" Morgan murmured, listening a little more intently, yet never shifting his glance from the Coffee Pot foreman. "Two of them. Sounded like more at first. Waitin' for your pals, Sam Grue and Drag Sanders to show up, huh? Had it all planned nice. They sent you on ahead to make preparations and to receive me so I wouldn't be suspicious, then they planned to pay a nice, friendly call."

He paused a second. When he spoke again his voice was sharp and thin as a razor edge.

"Hackle, if anything's happened to Mary I'm going to empty a six-gun into your guts where it'll take you two burning hours to die." And as the horses pounded to a halt outside, Flash Morgan slid along the wall with the feline speed and ease of a crafty panther waiting for his victim.

When Pitch Hackle, the flush of anger replaced by a sallow tint in his cheeks, called, "Come in," in reply to the hammering on the front door, Flash Morgan was leaning negligently against the wall in a rear corner, where the entire room was within his field of vision.

The living room door swung open and the huge form of Sam Grue, almost hiding his bowlegged little foreman, tramped in.

"'S that buckskin showed—" And then he paused, shifting his glance to Flash Morgan at a quick gesture from the Coffee Pot foreman.

"Hello Sam, and Drag. Been a long time since I cussed you two out for cutting my wire. I was just telling your Coffee Pot gunhand, here, that if anything's happened to Mary I'll be compelled to shoot his innards full of lead. You wouldn't know anything about it, would you, Sam?"

AND once more before the question could be answered there came an interruption. From the hall outside came the sound of footsteps descending the stairs. Flash, whose glances constantly shifted with febrile activity over the faces of the men before him, caught the sudden expression of astonishment that flickered for an instant in Pitch Hackle's eyes.

Grue's face became apoplectic as he barked at the Coffee Pot foreman, "I thought I told you to—"

"Pitch!" broke in a sharp, feminine voice, "Who locked me in—"

"Mary, can you hear me?" Flash called, quickly interrupting.

"Yes. Who—who is it?" came the reply, with a slight hesitancy and a touch of tremor, as though she had already guessed, but dared not trust herself to believe.

"Don't come any farther down the stairs, but tell me what happened."

Flash Morgan was away from the wall now, in the open. Though his body was relaxed, his narorw eyes

had begun their restless, dancing glitter that in the past had made those who knew him very careful of their movements.

"Why, I laid down for a short nap after supper and when I got up the door to my room was locked. Fortunately, I found a key that would fit and when I heard voices I came down to see—"

"All right. Now, listen, and hang onto yourself. Stay right where you are—no matter what I say—no matter *what happens.*"

He paused for a moment until he heard the rustle of movements, as if weakness had forced her to sit down, weakness induced by final, positive recognition of his voice. A faint "Yes," in agreement to his instructions was barely heard.

"I've learned many things since I left here, Mary. I learned some of them from Jim Dryer. I found him dying in the desert, and was unable to save him. That was nearly two years ago."

"The ravings of a madman, without proof," the big Sam Grue rumbled, his sharp, little eyes trying to read what lay beneath the emotionless bronze features of Flash Morgan.

Morgan continued as though there had been no break: "You already know he got you to sign a mortgage to this ranch before he left you. What you don't know is that Sam Grue, who is here now, imported that Mexican woman to work on Jim, and that when she had him where she wanted him, Grue paid Jim Dryer ten thousand dollars to kill your father by small, repeated doses of arsenic and then to execute the mortgage and leave. You didn't know that he took little Billie along, not because he wanted him, but because he had to. Bill saw him fix the last dose and give it to your father."

"That's a damned lie. I—" Grue shouted, his eyes popping, then darting from his bowlegged little spider, Drag Sanders, to the lean, hawk-featured Pitch Hackle.

"Billie, Flash? What has become of Billie?" came the sharp cry from the hall, followed by the sound of Mary Dryer rising and starting down the stairs.

"Stay where you are," Flash barked harshly, his quick glance centered on Sanders, but with Hackle still within his field of vision.

Grue tried again, and this time there was a touch of triumph in his voice. "A nice story that can't be proved, Morgan. I heard that when you left Sundown this afternoon you picked up your pack horse."

He paused, as if to exult silently. Flash's glance did not shift from the one he considered the fastest, and therefore the most dangerous, of the three, but his dark features seemed to become a trifle more angular. He made no reply, so Grue continued:

"Didn't see him with your saddle pony as we approached, so I sent three of my men searching the creek bottom. It's my hunch that where the cottonwoods are thickest—" And again he paused.

Three spaced shots had interrupted him.

"That means they've found your pack pony and are awaiting my signaled orders."

Silence hung over the room and Grue grinned into it. Movement ceased until Flash Morgan moved. And that movement was a smooth, timed, and deceptively swift upward sweep of his right hand.

"Signal them to bring that pony up here, and when they get here tell them to leave it and high-tail back to your 203 spread," Morgan stated softly.

GRUE stared at the muzzle of the forty-five that centered his paunch. He had a lot of respect and love for that paunch and the muzzle looked to him like the business end of a sixteen-inch cannon.

(*Continued on page* 154)

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(Continued from page 154)

dripped from his chin. Blood streamed down his left arm and dripped from his fingers. In terrible concentration on this one task, he ignored all sounds and movements around him. He snapped the cylinder shut as Flash Morgan leaped into the open.

Three guns exploded almost together. Grue fired and his shaking hand flung the lead wild. Pitch Hackle fired a fractional instant after Flash. Bright arterial blood shot from Hackle's neck as his lead streaked toward the ceiling.

Flash wheeled, and fired with the movement, throwing his shot. The poisonous little Drag Sanders' bullet nicked his ear as Morgan swung his gun toward Grue and thumbed the hammer. It fell with an empty click. Flash tried to bring up his left gun as he caught further movement from Drag Sanders. His muscles would not respond. The 203 foreman was on his way to the floor. Even in the act of dying, his reflexes were trying to get in one more shot.

The clatter of horses' hoofs and of shouting arose from outside. Flash Morgan straightened slowly. He shot the empty weapon into the leather and reached across to take the Colt from his left hand. Blood was crawling down his left arm and over the back of that hand. He was barely able to retain his hold on the weapon. Relieved of its burden, the hand flopped to his side. He swung the gun and Grue hurriedly dropped his weapon and shot his hands up, palms outward and open.

Footsteps pounded across the porch. The door crashed back. Morgan's thumb tightened over the hammer as he turned to meet the charge. Then he lowered the gun. Judge Ira Patton stood in the opening and behind him towered the lanky sheriff. The judge grinned slightly.

"Little late. Had to wait till the sheriff got back to town. But I reckon

(Continued on page 158)

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(Continued from page 156)

everything's been sort of taken care of."

Then Flash remembered.

"My pack horse—" he began, but the judge smiled.

"We met that little animal just now. The sheriff's deputies are corralin' the 203 jaspers who had it and its precious burden in tow. Mary's out there too. And how—" he turned with elaborate, courteous sarcasm—"is Mr. Grue?"

SOME of the horror of the death that had stared at him left the big rancher's piggy eyes. Color slowly came back to his ashen cheeks. He tried to draw himself up with a show of dignity while he leveled an accusing finger at Flash Morgan.

"That crazy, blood-hungry maniac started this, and he's been making insane accusations that wouldn't hold up even at a lynching party."

"No?" the judge interrupted smoothly. "What makes you think they won't hold up, when there's the written statement of the dying Jim Dryer to back them, and the testimony of little Billie Mattox, who saw what was done to his father?"

Grue's little eyes threatened to pop out of his head. His gaze shifted from the face of the white-haired judge to the lantern-jawed visage of the sheriff who approached. He stooped with surprising swiftness and snatched up his gun. The sheriff's hand dove for his own weapon, but Grue was too quick. He pressed the muzzle to his own forehead and pulled the trigger. There was only a sharp click. The sheriff grunted and shoved his Colt back into its leather.

Swift, light footsteps tapped across the veranda and hall. Old Judge Patton stepped swiftly aside as a bright-haired, starry-eyed young woman halted and stared in unbelief at the buckskin-clad Morgan.

"Flash! It really is you. And how wild—you look. Oh, you're wounded," she added in quick alarm.

A faint smile parted his lips.

NO BACK COVER

NO BACK COVER